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and layered'

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'Rich and nuanced'

SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL,  
STARRED REVIEW

CARTER JONES is shocked one morning to find a butler-bowler hat and all-standing on his doorstep in the pouring rain. And when the butler says he's moving in to help Carter's family—which is a little bit broken right now – Carter thinks it must be a joke. It's not.

To begin with, Carter finds the butler's obsession with manners, correct grammar and a stupid game called cricket very annoying. But as the burden of grief and anger that Carter has been hiding for so long begins to surface, he learns that maybe, just maybe, the butler has something to teach him after all.

'Beautifully written, often  
amusing, and ultimately moving'

BOOKLIST, STARRED REVIEW

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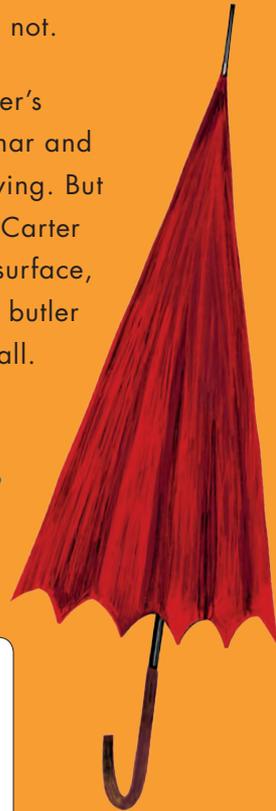
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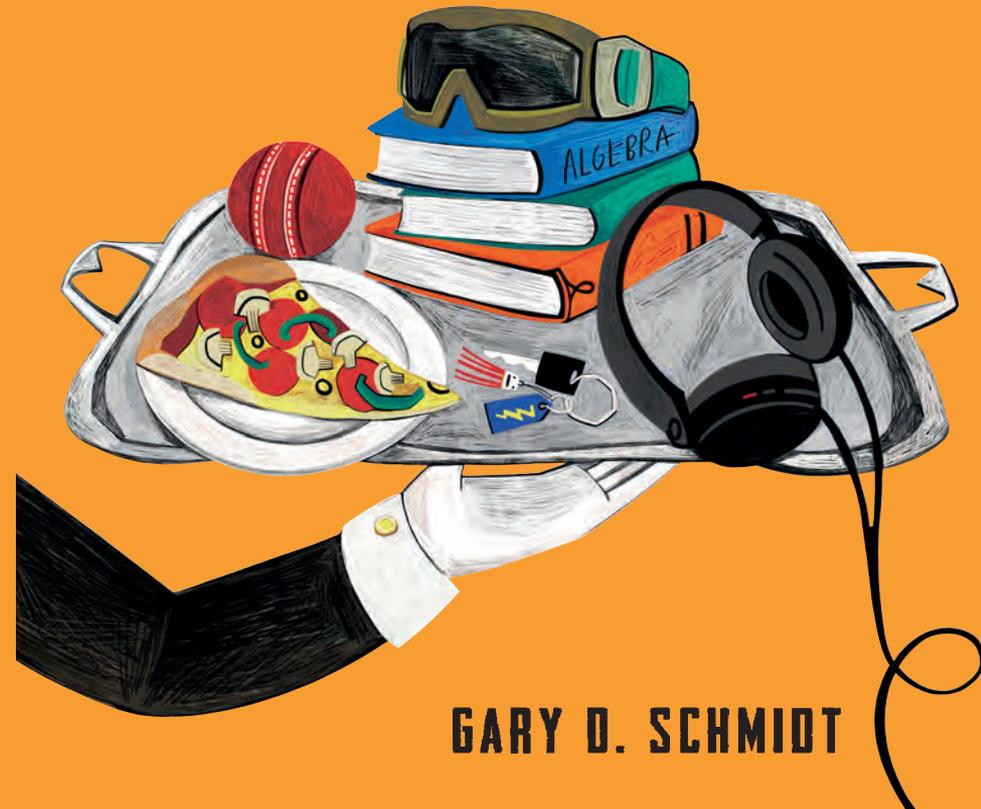
GARY D. SCHMIDT



PAY ATTENTION, Carter Jones

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**GARY D. SCHMIDT**



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*For Rebecca Lucy,  
with your father's love*



.|. .

## THE PLAYERS

*Cricket teams, both batting and fielding may have up to eleven players each. The captain of the batting team determines the order of the batsmen; the captain of the fielding team sets players in positions determined by the style and pace of the bowler.*

**IF** IT HADN'T been the first day of school, and if my mother hadn't been crying her eyes out the night before, and if the fuel pump on the Jeep had been doing what a fuel pump on a Jeep is supposed to be doing, and if it hadn't been raining like an Australian tropical thunderstorm – and I've been in one, so I know what it's like – and if the very last quart of one percent milk hadn't gone sour and clumped up, then probably my mother would never have let the Butler into our house.

But that's what the day had been like so far, and it was only 7:15 in the morning.

7:15 in the morning on the first day of school, when the Butler rang our doorbell.

I answered it.

I looked at the guy standing on our front stoop.

'Are you kidding?' I said.

That's what you would have said too. He was tall and big around the belly and wearing the kind of suit you'd wear to a funeral – I've been to one of those too, so I know what a funeral suit looks like – and he had a bowler hat on his head. A bowler! Which nobody has worn since, like, horses and carriages went out of business. And everything – the big belly, the funeral suit, the bowler – everything was completely dry even though it was an Australian tropical thunderstorm outside because he stood underneath an umbrella as big as a satellite-dish.

The guy looked down at me. 'I assure you, young man, I am never kidding.'

I closed the door.

I went to the kitchen. Mom was tying back Emily's hair, which explains why the dry Ace Robotroid Sugar

Stars Emily was eating were dribbling out both sides of her mouth. Charlie was still looking for her other yellow sock because she couldn't start fourth grade without it – she couldn't she couldn't she couldn't – and Annie was telling her what a baby she was, and Charlie was saying she was not she was not she was not, and just because Annie was going into fifth grade that didn't make Annie the boss of her. Then Charlie looked at me and said, 'Does it?' and I said, 'You think I care?'

'Carter,' my mom said, 'your oatmeal is on the stove and you'll have to mix in your own raisins and there's some walnuts too but no more brown sugar. And, Carter, before you do that, I need you to run down to the deli and—'

'There's a guy out on our front stoop,' I said.

'What?'

'There's a guy out on our front stoop.'

My mother stopped tying back Emily's hair.

'Is he from the army?' she said.

I shrugged.

'Is he or isn't he?'

‘He’s not wearing a uniform.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Pretty sure.’

My mother started tying back Emily’s hair again. ‘Tell him it’s the first day of school and he should go find someone else to buy whatever he’s selling at seven fifteen in the morning.’

‘Annie can do it.’

My mother gave me That Look, so I went back to the front door and opened it. ‘My mom says it’s the first day of school and you should go find someone else to buy whatever you’re selling at seven fifteen in the morning.’

He shook his umbrella.

‘Young Master Jones,’ he said, ‘please inform your mother that I would very much like to speak with her.’

I closed the door.

I went back to the kitchen.

‘Did you tell him to go away?’ said my mother. I think this is what she said. She had a bunch of bobby pins in her mouth and she was sticking them around Emily’s head and Emily was hollering and spitting out Ace Robotroid

Sugar Stars at every poke, so it was hard to understand what my mother was saying.

‘He wants to talk to you,’ I said.

‘He’s not going to—’

A sudden wail from Charlie, who held up her other yellow sock, which Ned had thrown up on. Ned is our dachshund and dachshunds throw up a lot.

‘Carter, go get some milk,’ said my mother. ‘Charlie, stop crying. Annie, it doesn’t help to make faces at Charlie. Emily, if you move your head again I’m going to bobby pin your bangs to your eyebrows.’

I went back to the front and opened the door.

The guy was still standing on the stoop, but the Australian tropical thunderstorm was starting to get in under the umbrella.

‘Listen,’ I said, ‘my mom’s going crazy in there. I have to go to the deli and get milk so we can eat breakfast. And Charlie’s crying because Ned threw up on her other yellow sock, and Annie’s being a pain in the glutes, and Emily’s bangs are about to get pinned to her eyebrows, and I haven’t even packed my backpack yet – and that takes a while, you know – and we have to leave soon

since we have to walk to school because the fuel pump on the Jeep isn't working, and we only have one umbrella. So just go away.'

The guy leaned down.

'Young Master Jones,' he said, 'if you were able to sprint between wickets with the speed of your run-on sentences, you would be welcome in any test match in the world. For now, though, go back inside. In your room, gather what is needed for your backpack. When you have completed that task, find your mother and do whatever is necessary to ensure that she is no longer' – he paused – 'going crazy.' He angled the umbrella a little to keep off the Australian tropical thunderstorm. 'While you are doing whatever is necessary, I will purchase the milk.'

I looked at the guy. He was wet up to his knees now.

'Do you always talk like that?' I said.

'If you are inquiring whether I always speak the Queen's English, the answer is, of course, yes.'

'I mean the way you say everything like you want it to smell good.'

The guy shook the rain off his umbrella. I sort of think he meant to shake it all over me.

‘Young Master Jones—’

‘And that: “Young Master Jones.” No one talks like that.’

‘Obviously, some do.’

‘And that: “Ob-vi-ous-ly.” It takes you a whole minute to say it. “Ob-vi-ous-ly”.’

The guy leaned down. ‘I am going to purchase the milk now,’ he said. ‘You shall pack your backpack. Do it properly, then attend to your mother.’

He turned to go.

‘Are you trying to convert me or something?’ I said.

‘Yes,’ he said, without turning back. ‘Now, to your appointed tasks.’

So I went upstairs and packed the new notebooks and old pens and old pencils and my father’s old science calculator in my backpack, and I put the green marble in my front pocket – all this did take a while, you know – and then I went down to the kitchen where my mother was braiding Annie’s hair and Charlie was sniffing with her arms crossed and Emily was finishing her dry Ace Robotroid Sugar Stars. My mother said, ‘Where’s the milk?’ and then the doorbell rang again.

'I'll get it,' I said.

Guess who it was.

His suit was wet most of the way up his legs when he handed me a bag.

'I have procured the milk,' he said.

'Obviously,' I said. 'Is it one percent?'

'Certainly not – and mockery is the lowest form of discourse.'

He handed me another bag.

'What's this?' I said.

'The package is for Miss Charlotte,' he said. 'Tell her we are most fortunate that American delicatessens are, though parsimonious in their selection of food items that have seen the light of the sun, at least eclectic.'

'She won't know what *eclectic* means.'

'Copious.'

'That either.'

The guy sighed. 'The contents are self-explanatory.'

I took the bags and closed the door. I carried the milk to the kitchen and set it on the table. Then I gave Charlie the other bag.

'What's this?' she said.

‘How should I know?’

‘Because you’re handing it to me. That’s how you should know.’

‘It’s something electric,’ I said.

‘Something electric?’

‘I don’t know. It’s from the guy standing on our front stoop.’

My mother looked up from Annie’s braids. ‘The guy standing on our front stoop? He’s still there?’

Charlie opened her bag and took out – I know this is hard to believe – brand-new bright yellow socks. She screamed her happy scream. That’s the scream she makes that could stop a planet from spinning.

My mother looked at the bright yellow socks, then at the milk.

‘It’s not one percent,’ she said.

‘Certainly not,’ I said.

My mother dropped Annie’s braids and headed out of the kitchen.

.2.

## THE WICKET

*The wicket may refer to the stumps and bails placed at either end of the playing surface or to the playing surface itself.*

**WE** WERE ALL behind my mother when she opened the front door.

The guy was still standing there, underneath his satellite-dish umbrella, which wasn't doing much any more since the Australian tropical thunderstorm was blowing sideways now.

'Who are you?' said my mother.

He gave a little bow and rain waterfalled off the front of his umbrella, just like in an Australian rainforest. 'Mrs Jones, I am an acquaintance of your father-in-law

and husband, having served the first for many years and attended the childhood of the second.'

'Is he all right?'

'I assume you speak of the second.'

My mother put her hands on her hips. She still had a bobby pin tucked in the corner of her mouth, and she put on That Look, so she came off pretty tough.

'Captain Jones was, during our last connection, well enough. I called him ten days ago by telephone to inform him that his father, Mr Seymour Jones, had passed away.'

'Passed away?' said Emily.

The guy leaned down. 'I am so very sorry to tell you, Miss Emily, that your grandfather has died.'

'She never knew him,' said my mother. 'None of us did. You better come in.'

'Thank you, madam. Dripping might pose a problem.'

'It's only water,' said my mother.

'Thank you, madam.'

Together we all moved back, and the guy stood in our front hall, and dripping was a problem.

'So you're here to tell us about my husband's father?' said my mother. 'You could have just written.'

‘Your father-in-law’s passing is only part of my message, madam. I am to inform you as well that Mr Seymour Jones has left a most generous endowment to support my continuing service to his family.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said my mother.

‘It seems reasonable to consider that a family with four young children and a father currently deployed in Germany might well stand in need of some aid suited to my occupation.’

‘You’re here to help out?’

The guy gave another little bow. Really.

‘While Jack’s deployed?’

He nodded.

‘Jack,’ she said. ‘Jack sent you.’

‘In a manner of speaking,’ said the guy.

My mother dropped That Look. She smiled. She started to bite her lip like she does when she’s about to . . . Never mind.

‘I can assure you, madam, my service in this capacity is exemplary, and I would gladly furnish names and addresses for reference, should you desire them.’

‘Wait,’ I said. ‘You mean my grandfather, like, left you to us in his will?’

‘Crudely articulated, but true in the most generous sense.’

‘Like, we own you?’

The guy carefully tied shut the folds of his umbrella. ‘Young Master Jones, indentured servanthood having been abolished even in your country, no. You do not, like, own me.’

‘So,’ said Charlie, ‘you’re a nanny?’

The guy’s eyes opened wide.

‘No, moron. He’s not a nanny,’ I said.

‘Jack sent a butler,’ my mother said, mostly to herself.

The guy cleared his throat. ‘I am most conservative about such matters,’ he said. ‘I would very much prefer to be known as a gentleman’s gentleman.’

My mother shook her head.

‘A gentleman’s gentleman,’ she said. ‘Jack sent a gentleman’s gentleman.’

The guy bowed his little bow again.

‘There’s just one problem,’ she said. ‘There’s no gentleman here.’

Then the guy looked straight at me. Really. Straight at me. ‘Perhaps not yet,’ he said, and he handed me the satellite-dish umbrella.

That was how the Butler came into our house.

Can I just say, I wasn’t so sure about this. I mean, he *said* he was a gentleman’s gentleman – which, obviously, is a dumb way to say ‘butler’ – but he could have been some kind of missionary in disguise. Or someone selling satellite-dish umbrellas. Or someone casing out our place for a burglary. Or a serial killer. Anything.

I could tell my mother wasn’t so sure about him either.

That’s why she thought for a long time when the Butler offered to drive us to school. When he asked, I whispered ‘Serial killer’ to my mother, and she whispered ‘The fuel pump in the Jeep,’ and I whispered ‘Probably no ID,’ and she whispered ‘Raining hard’ – and it was still raining like an Australian tropical thunderstorm – but I shrugged and whispered, ‘Does it matter to you if you never see us alive again?’ and that was really stupid because now she bit her lip hard and it was so

really stupid because it was like I had forgotten that funeral.

So really stupid.

She closed her eyes for, like, a minute and then she opened them again and said she'd decided to go along with us to school, and the Butler nodded. My mother gave me a look – not That Look, but a look that said, 'Don't let this guy out of your sight because maybe you're right and he really could be a serial killer;' and then she went upstairs to get dressed.

So I was all over him when he opened up the four lunch bags and folded napkins into them – just to be sure he was putting in only napkins and not tracts or poison powder or anything like that. And I was still all over him when he finished Annie's hair and got the staples out of Charlie's new socks and pinned back Emily's bangs again because they had already come out.

You never know what a serial killer might do to throw you off-guard.

Ned would have been all over him too, but he was pretty excited, and like I told you, dachshunds throw up a lot – which he did again underneath the kitchen table

after he sniffed the Butler's wet cuffs. The Butler started to wipe it up – I didn't need to be all over him while he was doing that – and when my mother came down and saw him under the kitchen table, she said he didn't come across the Atlantic to clean up after a dog, and he said, 'Madam, the parameters of my duties are wide-ranging' – so my mother let him take care of Ned's throw-up and then we all went outside, sort of crowded together under the satellite-dish umbrella, which I was still holding.

My mother got in front and the four of us squeezed in the back, and we drove to school in the Butler's car, which was big and long and purple – like an eggplant. It had white-rimmed tyres. It had running boards. On the front it had a chrome statue of someone who looked like she would be pretty cold in a stiff wind. It had pale yellow seats made of soft leather. And it also had, according to the Butler, 'a properly placed steering mechanism' – even though it sure looked wrong to me.

So that's what we drove in to school instead of the Jeep.

When we dropped Annie off at the fifth-grade door, the Butler got out of the car, came around in the

Australian tropical thunderstorm with his satellite-dish umbrella, opened the passenger door, and said, 'Miss Anne, make good decisions and remember who you are.'

'I will,' she said.

My mother watched her run into the building. 'I could have sworn I put her hair in two braids,' she said.

'She preferred the one,' said the Butler.

When we dropped Charlie off, the Butler opened the door and said, 'Miss Charlotte, make good decisions and remember who you are,' and Charlie held up her foot to show the Butler she was wearing her new bright yellow socks.

My mother told her to cut it out and get inside before she got soaked.

When we dropped Emily off, the Butler opened the door and said, 'Miss Emily, make good decisions and remember who you are,' and Emily asked if the Butler was going to pick us up in his purple car after school.

'No,' I said.

My mother said, 'Watch for the Jeep.'

Then we drove to the middle school building, and while the Butler got out of the car, I got out too – before

he could open my door. But he stood at the kerb with his satellite-dish umbrella in the Australian tropical thunderstorm – the rain was splashing off the running boards – and he took off his bowler and said, ‘Make good decisions and remember who you are, young Master Jones.’ He put his bowler back on.

‘You think I’m going to forget who I am?’ I said.

‘You are entering middle school now,’ he said. ‘I think it quite likely.’ Then he opened his door, folded his umbrella, and got inside again.

He drove off with my mother in the seat beside him. For a moment, I wondered if I would ever see her again.

I checked my front pocket for the green marble.

Then Billy Colt came up behind me, and he said, ‘Who was that?’

‘Our butler,’ I said.

‘You have a butler?’

The marble was there. ‘So?’ I said.

We watched the purple car pull in front of a bus and drive away in the rain.

‘His car looks like an eggplant,’ said Billy Colt.

‘Yup.’

'And he looks like a missionary.'

'Yup,' I said.

'Or a serial killer.'

'That too.'

Then we went inside to start our first day of sixth grade.

.3.

## THE BOUNDARY

*The perimeter of the pitch is generally lined in white chalk setting the limits of play within this boundary.*

**OK, SO A LOT** of the first day of sixth grade was pretty much what I expected. All the halls had new bulletin board displays that said WELCOME BACK, MINUTEMEN! and once we all got into our homerooms the loudspeaker came on and Vice Principal DelBanco welcomed everyone to school like it was the best thing in the whole world and wasn't everyone glad to be back at Longfellow Middle School and let's all give a big Longfellow Middle School welcome to all the new sixth graders because remember, seventh and eighth graders,

you were once new sixth graders too! Then Principal Swieteck came on and she said she hoped we all would have a wonderful year and that she was eager to see all of us in our new classes – but she hoped she wouldn't see any of us in her office this year. (That was supposed to be a principal joke.)

Classes weren't as bad as I thought they were going to be. I got Mr Barkus for Math Skills, and he showed us how he could memorise everyone's name, nickname, and street address after hearing them only once. I got Mrs Harknet for homeroom, and she looked like she'd be OK – mostly because she had filled her classroom with more paperbacks than are in most libraries. The gym had that new gym smell and it was all ready for that first squeak across the glowing floor, even though Coach Krosoczka was patrolling the edges, making sure no sixth grader was stepping onto his floor wearing anything but sneakers. In the cafeteria, the lunch ladies had loaded strawberry milk into the coolers, which I'd never had before, but it seemed like a pretty good idea. In the science hall, Mrs Wrubell had arranged glass beakers next to Bunsen burners so that her classroom

looked like Frankenstein's lab and she told us we could try anything as long as we checked with her to make sure it wouldn't explode. Mr Solaski told us we were now done with elementary school and he took education seriously and so should we – so he started right in teaching about the Boston Tea Party like he wasn't going to spend a minute not talking about American history. And I had Mrs Harknet for Language Arts too, and she handed out textbooks that got printed, like, yesterday so the pages were still stuck together, but they looked all right even though they had poetry between the good parts.

So, pretty much what I expected – like shedding summer all day.

But there was one thing I hadn't expected.

Stupid Billy Colt told everyone about the Butler.

Everyone in the sixth grade.

All day long it was, 'You have a butler? Really?'

And, 'They still make butlers?'

And, 'Is your butler going to carry your books to school?'

And, 'Does your butler open your door for you and, like, bow all the time?'

And, 'So does your butler tuck you in at night?'

That last one was from stupid Billy Colt, who almost got a face full of fist until I remembered who I was and made a good decision.

It helped that Vice Principal DelBanco was standing right there.

But when school was finally over and I was about to leave – and it was still raining an Australian tropical thunderstorm – I looked out the sixth-grade door and saw a whole crowd of sixth graders standing where the kids who get picked up stand, looking at something big and purple. Even kids who take the bus were standing there. So I walked over to the elementary building's fifth-grade door and I got Annie and we went around to the fourth-grade door and got Charlie and then we went to the second-grade door and found Emily and we stood there like giants around the second graders until the Butler came to pick us up.

My mother was in the front seat again.

We all squeezed in the back.

'How was your first day?' she said.

'I thought you were going to pick us up in the Jeep,' I said.

'It's still in the shop,' she said.

'I hope it won't be in the shop tomorrow.'

'Young Master Jones . . .'

'Carter. My name is Carter. That's *Carter*.'

'So you did remember. Most gratifying. Young Master Jones, what you mean to say to your mother is "And how was your day?"'

'What I mean to say is—'

'Because your mother has had a very long one, punctuated with unfortunate mechanical news of all stripes – if you'll pardon my interruption of your interruption.'

'The Jeep?' I said.

'The Jeep is on its last legs,' said my mother.

'Are you sure?'

The Butler looked over at me. 'The mechanic's colloquial description of the situation was this: "Lady, you can stick a fork in this one and call it done."'

'So what are we going to do now?'

'Carter,' my mother said, 'let's just get home.'

'Is the Jeep dead?' said Emily, in that voice that tells you she's about to cry.

‘Don’t be a baby,’ I said.

‘I’m not a baby,’ she said.

‘Carter,’ said my mother – with That Look.

So we drove home in the Eggplant, with the windscreen wipers thumping back and forth, back and forth, back and forth – the only sound in the stupid purple car.

When we got back home, Ned was waiting for us – and he got pretty excited again and started bouncing around on his short legs and barking his high ‘Where have you been?’ bark until he threw up. I figured this was a good time to take my backpack upstairs, but the Butler didn’t think so.

‘Young Master Jones,’ he said, and pointed.

‘Aren’t you supposed to do stuff like that?’ I said.

‘On the occasion of emergency. Had I been hired as your scullery maid – apparently with regularity. But I am not your scullery maid.’ He handed me a roll of paper towels and a plastic bag.

‘Usually my mother—’

‘Neither is your mother a scullery maid,’ said the Butler.

‘So I am?’

‘For such a time as this,’ said the Butler.

I took the roll of paper towels and the plastic bag.  
I knelt down.

It was disgusting.

When I was finished, the Butler handed me Ned’s  
leash.

‘It’s raining,’ I said.

The Butler went to the mudroom, brought back his  
satellite-dish umbrella, and handed it to me.

‘I usually don’t take Ned for walks right after school,’  
I said. ‘I sort of like to crash.’

‘A habit confirmed by Ned’s protruding belly. Isn’t it  
fortunate that habits may be changed with discipline?’

‘Mom,’ I said.

‘Only around the block,’ she said.

‘Around the block?’ I said. ‘I’ll be sopping wet when I  
get back.’

Annie started to laugh.

‘By which time Miss Anne will be well into her piano  
practice,’ said the Butler.

‘I’m not taking piano lessons any more,’ she said.

'A loss that you and I shall amend.'

Annie no longer laughing.

'This isn't fair,' I said.

'An irrelevancy,' said the Butler.

'What does that mean?'

'It means that the claim of fairness is the consistent if unsympathetic whine of one who lives in a republic. A monarchist such as myself recognises the virtue of simply getting to the thing that must be done. So, to it, young Master Jones.'

I took Ned out.

The Australian tropical thunderstorm – which had thundered and stormed on and off all day – waited until we got out the door to start coming down sideways again. I didn't even try to use the satellite-dish umbrella. I figured that Ned would want to go back inside right away, so we'd only be out for like, a minute – but he didn't want to go back inside. He loved it. He ran through puddles up to his belly and let his ears blow straight behind him and kept his eyes mostly closed and his nose pointed up, and he watered the azaleas in front of the Ketchums' house and the rhododendrons in front of

the Briggses' house and the holly hedge in front of the Rockcastles' house and the petunias in front of the Koertges' house, and then he pooped next to Billy Colt's driveway – which I figured stupid Billy Colt deserved for blabbing about the Butler – and then he went again in the day lilies on the other side of Billy Colt's driveway, and then we headed back since we were both starting to shiver and Ned couldn't have had anything left anyway after all he'd done.

And when we got home, the kitchen was warm as anything. There was a rag rug on the floor for Ned and a fluffy towel waiting for me and the Butler told me to go upstairs and put on dry clothes and then come right down. So I did, and when I came back into the kitchen there were hot chocolate chip cookies and a mug of something steaming.

'What's this?' I said.

'Tea with milk and sugar,' said the Butler.

'I don't drink tea,' I said.

'All civilised people drink tea, young Master Jones.'

'Then I guess I'm not civilised.'

'A claim you share with Vikings, Huns, assorted

barbarian hordes, and marauders of all stripes. I have taken the liberty of adding more sugar than one might normally expect.'

I sipped at it. I sipped again. It was pretty good.

'It stinks,' I said.

The Butler sighed. 'There is no need to announce repeatedly how very American you are.'

'You know, I think I might know something about this, since I can remember who I am, but tell me if I'm wrong,' I said. 'We are in America, right? I mean, I'm supposed to be American, right?'

The Butler sighed again. 'I think, young Master Jones, we will need to come to an understanding.'

*You bet*, I thought.