

## **Slowly, Slowly in the Wind**    *Patricia Highsmith*

Edward (Skip) Skipperton spent most of his life feeling angry. It was his nature. When he was a boy he had a bad temper; now, as a man, he was impatient with people who were slow or stupid. He often met such people in his work, which was to give advice on managing companies. He was good at his job: he could see when people were doing something the wrong way, and he told them in a loud, clear voice how to do it better. The company directors always followed his advice.

Now Skipperton was fifty-two. His wife had left him two years ago, because she couldn't live with his bad temper. She had met a quiet university teacher in Boston, ended her marriage with Skip and married the teacher. Skip wanted very much to keep their daughter, Maggie, who was then fifteen. With the help of clever lawyers he succeeded.

A few months after he separated from his wife, Skip had a heart attack. He was better again in six months, but his doctor gave him some strong advice.

'Stop smoking and drinking now, or you're a dead man, Skip! And I think you should leave the world of business, too – you've got enough money. Why don't you buy a small farm, and live quietly in the country?'

So Skip looked around, and bought a small farm in Maine with a comfortable farmhouse. A little river, the Coldstream, ran along the bottom of the garden, and the house was called Coldstream Heights. He found a local man, Andy Humbert, to live on the farm and work for him:

Maggie was moved from her private school in New York to one in Switzerland; she would come home for the holidays. Skip did stop smoking and drinking: when he decided to do

something, he always did it immediately. There was work for him on the farm. He helped Andy to plant corn in the field behind the house; he bought two sheep to keep the grass short, and a pig which soon gave birth to twelve more.

There was only one thing that annoyed him: his neighbour. Peter Frosby owned the land next to his, including the banks of the Coldstream and the right to catch fish in it. Skip wanted to be able to fish a little. He also wanted to feel that the part of the river which he could see from the house belonged to him. But when he offered to buy the fishing rights, he was told that Frosby refused to sell. Skip did not give up easily. The next week he telephoned Frosby, inviting him to his house for a drink. Frosby arrived in a new Cadillac, driven by a young man. He introduced the young man as his son, also called Peter. Frosby was a rather small, thin man with cold grey eyes.

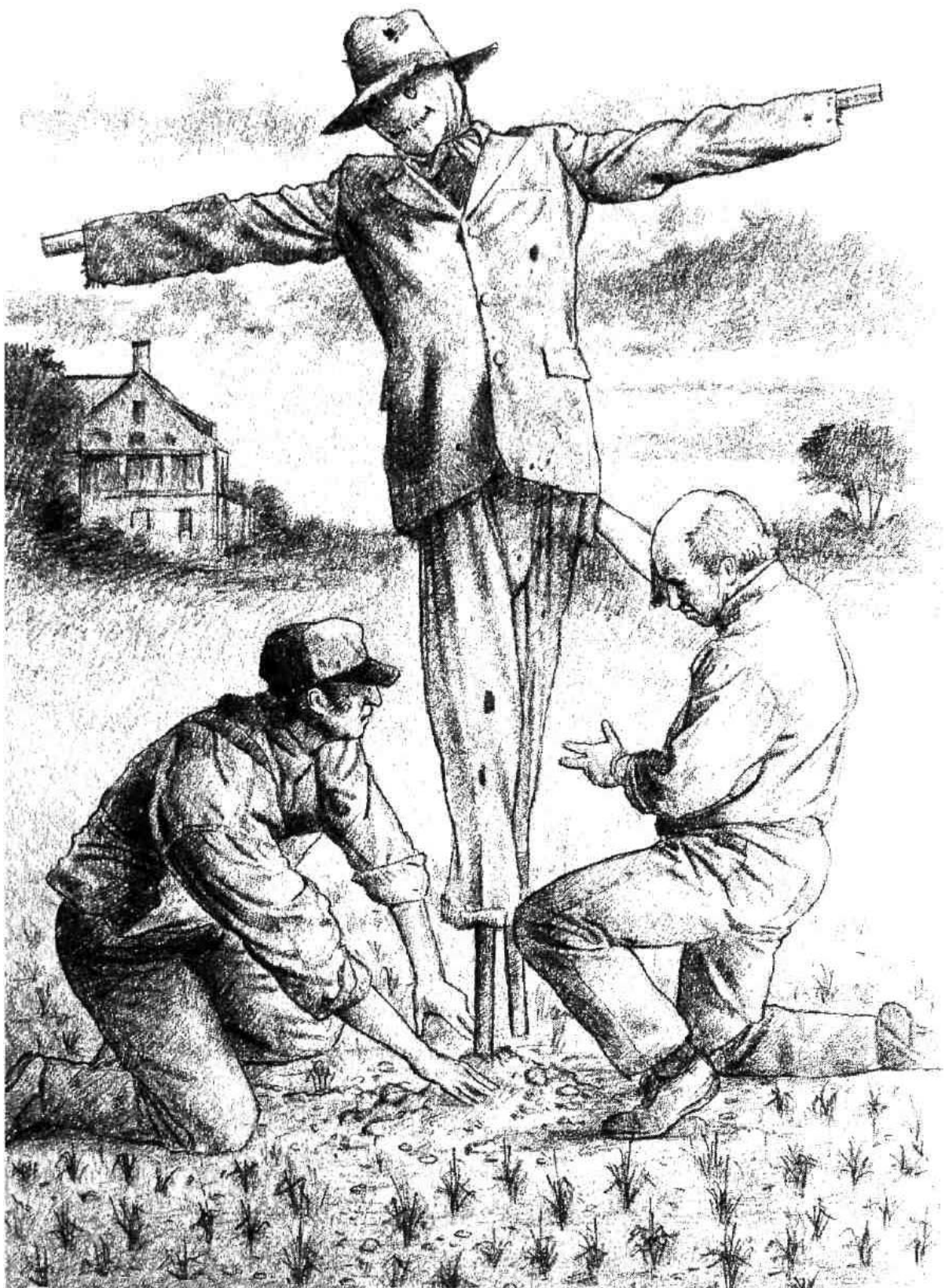
‘The Frosbys don’t sell their land,’ he said. ‘We’ve had the same land for nearly 300 years, and the river’s always been ours. I can’t understand why you want it.’

‘I’d just like to do a little fishing in the summer,’ said Skip. ‘And I think you’ll agree that the price I offer isn’t bad – twenty thousand dollars for about 200 metres of fishing rights. You won’t get such a good offer again in your lifetime.’

‘I’m not interested in *my* lifetime,’ Frosby said with a little smile. ‘I’ve got a son here.’

The son was a good-looking boy with dark hair and strong shoulders, taller than his father. He sat there with his arms across his chest, and appeared to share his father’s negative attitude. Still, he smiled as they were leaving and said, ‘You’ve made this house look very nice, Mr Skipperton.’ Skip was pleased. He had tried hard to choose the most suitable furniture for the sitting room.

‘I see you like old-fashioned things,’ said Frosby. ‘That scarecrow in your field – we haven’t seen one of those around here for many years.’



*Skip and Andy had made a scarecrow . . .*



‘I’m trying to grow corn out there,’ Skip said. ‘I think you need a scarecrow in a cornfield.’

Young Peter was looking at a photograph of Maggie, which stood on the hall table. ‘Pretty girl,’ he said.

Skip said nothing. The meeting had failed. Skip wasn’t used to failing. He looked into Frosby’s cold grey eyes and said: ‘I’ve one more idea. I could rent the land by the river for the rest of my life, and then it goes to you – or your son. I’ll give you five thousand dollars a year.’

‘I don’t think so, Mr Skipperton. Thank you for the drink, and – goodbye.’

‘Stupid man,’ said Skip to Andy, as the Cadillac moved off. But he smiled. Life was a game, after all. You won sometimes, you lost sometimes.

It was early May. The corn which they had planted was beginning to come up through the earth. Skip and Andy had made a scarecrow from sticks joined together – one stick for the body and head, another for the arms and two more for the legs. They had dressed it in an old coat and trousers that Andy had found, and had put an old hat of Skip’s on its head.

The weeks passed and the corn grew high. Skip tried to think of ways to annoy Frosby, to force him to rent part of the river to him.

But he forgot about Frosby when Maggie came home for the summer holidays.

Skip met her at the airport in New York, and they drove up to Maine. Skip thought she looked taller; she was certainly more beautiful!

‘I’ve got a surprise for you at home,’ Skip said.

‘Oh – a horse, perhaps?’

Skip had forgotten she was learning to ride. ‘No, not a horse.’ The surprise was a red Toyota. He had remembered, at least, that Maggie’s school had taught her to drive. She was very excited,

and threw her arms round Skip's neck. 'Oh Father your so sweet! And you're looking *very* well!'

Skip and Maggie went for a drive in the new car the next morning. In the afternoon Maggie asked her father if she could go fishing in the stream. He had to tell her that she couldn't, and he explained the reason.

'Well, never mind, there are a lot of other things to do.' Maggie enjoyed going for walks, reading and doing little jobs in the house.

Skip was surprised one evening when Maggie arrived home in her Toyota carrying three fish. He was afraid she had been fishing in the stream, against his instructions.

'Where did you get those?'

'I met the boy who lives there. We were both buying petrol, and he introduced himself – he said he'd seen my photograph in your house. Then we had coffee together—'

'The Frosby boy?'

'Yes. He's very nice. Perhaps it's only the father who's not nice. Well, Pete said, "Come and fish with me this afternoon", so I did. It was fun.'

'I don't – please, Maggie, I don't want you to mix with the Frosbys.'

Maggie was surprised, but said nothing.

The next day, Maggie said she wanted to go to the village to buy some shoes. She was away for nearly three hours. With a great effort, Skip didn't question her.

Then on Saturday morning, Maggie said there was a dance in the nearest town, and she was going.

'I can guess who you're going with,' Skip said angrily.

'I'm going alone, I promise you. Girls don't need a boy to take them to dances now.'

Skip realized that he couldn't order her not to go to a dance. But he knew the Frosby boy would be there. And he knew what

was going to happen. His daughter was falling in love with Pete Frosby.

Maggie, got home very late that night, after Skip had gone to bed. At breakfast, she looked fresh and happy.

‘I expect the Frosby boy was at the dance?’ said Skip.

‘I don’t know what you’ve got against him, Father.’

‘I don’t want you to fall in love with an uneducated country boy. I sent you to a good school.’

‘Pete had three years at Harvard University.’ Maggie stood up. ‘I’m almost eighteen, Father. I don’t want to be told who I can and can’t see.’

Skip shouted at her: ‘They’re not our kind of people!’

Maggie left the room.

During the next week Skip was in a terrible state. In his business life he had always been able to force people to do what he wanted – but he couldn’t think of a way to do that with his daughter.

The following Saturday evening, Maggie said she was going to a party. It was at the house of a boy called Wilmers, who she had met at the dance. By Sunday morning, Maggie hadn’t come home. Skip telephoned the Wilmers’ house.

A boy’s voice said that Maggie had left the party early.

‘Was she alone?’

‘No, she was with Pete Frosby. She left her car here.’

Skip felt the blood rush to his face. His hand was shaking as he picked up the telephone to call the Frosby house. Old Frosby answered. He said Maggie was not there. And his son was out at the moment.

‘What do you mean? Do you mean he was there earlier and he went out?’

‘Mr Skipperton, my son has his own ways, his own room, his own key – his own life. I’m not going to—’

Skip put the telephone down.

Maggie was not home by Sunday evening or Monday morning. Skip didn't want to inform the police. On Tuesday there was a letter from Maggie, written from Boston. It said that she and Pete had run away to be married.

. . .You may think this is sudden, but we do love each other, and we know what we're doing. I didn't really want to go back to school. Please don't try to find me – you'll hear from me next week. I was sorry to leave my nice new car.

Love always,  
MAGGIE.

For two days Skip didn't go out of the house, and he ate almost nothing. He felt three-quarters dead. Andy was very worried about him. When he needed to go to the village to buy some food, he asked Skip to go with him.

While Andy did the shopping, Skip sat in the car, looking at nothing. But then a figure coming down the street caught his eye. Old Frosby!

He hoped Frosby wouldn't see him in the car, but Frosby did. He didn't pause, but he smiled his unpleasant little smile as he went past. At that moment Skip realized how much he hated Frosby. His blood boiled with anger, and he felt much better: he was himself again. Frosby must be punished! He began to make a plan.

That evening, Skip suggested to Andy that he should go away for the weekend and enjoy himself. 'You've earned a holiday!' he said, and gave him three hundred dollars.

Andy left on Saturday evening, in the car. Skip then telephoned old Frosby, and said it was time they became friends. He asked Frosby to come to Coldsteam Heights again. Frosby was surprised, but he agreed to come on Sunday morning at about eleven for a talk. He arrived in the Cadillac, alone.

Skip acted quickly. He had his heavy gun ready, and as soon as Frosby was inside the door he hit him on the head several times with the end of the gun until Frosby was dead. He then took off his clothes and tied an old cloth round the body. He burned Frosby's clothes in the fireplace, and hid his watch and rings in a drawer.

Then Skip put one arm around Frosby's body, and pulled him out of the house and up the field to the scarecrow. The corn had already been cut. He pulled down the old scarecrow and took the clothes off the sticks. He dressed Frosby in the old coat and trousers, tied a small cloth round his face and pushed the hat onto his head.

When he stood the scarecrow up again it looked almost the same as before. As Skip went back to the house, he turned round many times to admire his work.

He had solved the problem of what to do with the body.

Next he buried Frosby's watch and rings under a big plant in the garden. It was now half past twelve, and he had to do something with the Cadillac. He drove it to some woods a few kilometres away and left it there, after cleaning off all his fingerprints. He hadn't seen anybody

Soon after he got home a woman telephoned from Frosby's house (his housekeeper, Skip guessed) to ask if Frosby was with him. He told her that Frosby had left his house at about twelve, and he hadn't said where he was going. He said the same thing to the policeman who came to see him in the evening, and to Maggie when she telephoned from Boston. He found it easy to lie about Frosby.

Andy arrived back the next morning, Monday. He had already heard the story in the village, and also knew that the police had found Frosby's car not far away in the woods. He didn't ask any questions.

In the next week Skip spent a lot of time watching the



scarecrow from his upstairs bedroom window. He thought with pleasure of old Frosby's body there, drying – slowly, slowly in the wind.



After ten days the policeman came back, with a detective. They looked over Skip's house and land, and they looked at his two guns. They didn't find anything.

That evening, Maggie came to see him; she and Pete were at the Frosby house. It was hard for Skip to believe she was married. It had all happened so fast.

'Pete's very worried and upset,' she said. 'Was Mr Frosby unhappy when he visited you?'

Skip laughed. 'No, very cheerful! And pleased with the marriage. Are you going to live at the Frosby house?'

'Yes. I'll take some things back with me.'

She seemed cold and sad, which made Skip unhappy.



'I know what's in that scarecrow,' said Andy one day.

'Do you? What are you going to do about it?' Skip asked.

'Nothing. Nothing,' Andy answered with a smile.

'Perhaps you would like some money, Andy? A little present – for keeping quiet?'

'No sir,' Andy said quietly. 'I'm not that kind of man.'

Skip didn't understand. He was used to men who liked money, more and more of it. Andy was different. He was a good man.

The leaves were falling from the trees and winter was coming. The children in the area were getting ready to celebrate the evening of 31<sup>st</sup> October, when people wore special clothes and had special things to eat, and lit great fires outside and danced around them singing songs.

No one came to Skip's house that evening. There was a party at the Frosbys' house – he could hear the music in the distance. He thought of his daughter dancing, having a good time. Skip was lonely, for the first time in his life. Lonely. He very much wanted a drink, but he decided to keep his promise to himself.

At that moment he saw a spot of light moving outside the window. He looked out. There was a line of figures crossing his field, carrying lights. Anger and fear rushed through him. They were on his land! They had no right! And they were children, he realized. The figures were small.

He ran downstairs and out into the field. 'What do you think you're doing?' he shouted. 'Get off my property!'

The children didn't hear him. They were singing a song. 'We're going to burn the scarecrow...'

'Get off my land!' Skip fell and hurt his knee. Now the children had heard him, he was sure, but they weren't stopping. They were going to reach the scarecrow before him. He heard a cry. They had got there.

There were more cries, of terror mixed with pleasure.

Perhaps their hands had touched the body.

Skip made his way back to his house. It was worse than the police. Every child was going to tell his parents what he had found. Skip knew he had reached the end. He had seen a lot of men in business reach the end. He had known men who had jumped out of windows.

Skip went straight to his gun. He put the end in his mouth, and fired. When the children came running back across the field to the road, Skip was dead.

Andy heard the shot from his room over the garage. He had also seen the children crossing the field, and heard Skip shouting. He understood what had happened.

He began walking towards the house. He would have to call the police. Andy decided to say that he didn't know anything



*'Get off my property!'*

about the body in the scarecrows clothes. He had been away that weekend, after all.