

UNVEILING STRUCTURAL IRONY: A PROPPIAN ANALYSIS OF ROALD DAHL'S "LAMB TO THE SLAUGHTER"

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Abstract

This paper examines Roald Dahl's *Lamb to the Slaughter* using Vladimir Propp's Morphology of the Folktale to uncover the underlying structural and character functions embedded within the narrative. Although classified as a modern domestic crime story, the tale aligns with traditional folktale structures through its sequence of narrative functions and character archetypes. By mapping Propp's 31 functions and seven spheres of action onto the story's events, this analysis reveals how these classical elements are preserved, inverted, or subverted to create irony and critique societal expectations, especially those surrounding gender and justice. Mary Maloney, the central character, structurally embodies the role of the "hero," despite committing a crime, while other roles such as villain, helper, donor, and false hero are cleverly reassigned. The study also highlights how the narrative challenges the conventional notion of justice and authority, revealing the flexibility and relevance of Proppian theory when applied to modern literature. Ultimately, this research affirms the enduring utility of structuralist frameworks in revealing hidden ideological dimensions in contemporary storytelling.

Keywords: Proppian Analysis, Narrative Structure, Gender Subversion, Modern Folktale, Irony

INTRODUCTION

Roald Dahl's *Lamb to the Slaughter* (1953) is a macabre yet humorous tale that defies conventional morality. At the center is Mary Maloney, a devoted housewife whose seemingly docile persona is upended when her husband, Patrick, unexpectedly requests a divorce. The irony deepens as Mary murders him with a frozen leg of lamb, then manipulates the police into destroying the evidence—by feeding it to them.

Traditionally, structuralist analysis has focused on folklore and mythology, but recent applications demonstrate its value in analyzing modern narratives (Ryan, 2007; Cobley, 2001). Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) introduced a system of recurring functions and character roles that transcend cultural boundaries. Although *Lamb to the Slaughter* is far removed from Slavic folktales, it presents a complete narrative arc with functionally equivalent moments of

betrayal, transformation, trickery, and ironic resolution.

This paper applies Proppian analysis not merely to classify narrative events, but to interrogate how these functions are repurposed in a tale driven by irony, gender reversal, and justice evasion. Dahl's manipulation of structure invites a closer examination of how traditional archetypes are reimagined for modern storytelling.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach grounded in narrative structuralism as developed by Vladimir Propp. This approach is chosen due to its primary focus on revealing the underlying structure and narrative functions within a literary text, rather than exploring the sociological or psychological context of its characters. Propp's morphological theory, first introduced in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), provides a systematic framework for

identifying character roles and the sequence of narrative functions.

Methodologically, the study begins with a close reading of Roald Dahl’s short story *Lamb to the Slaughter*. This reading aims to identify the central narrative elements such as plot development, character dynamics, and turning points. Once the general structure of the story is understood, the next phase involves mapping the narrative structure onto Propp’s 31 narrative functions. While not all of these functions appear in modern narratives, their sequence or pattern often remains recognizable. Therefore, this analysis is also interpretative—adjusting Propp’s functions contextually to fit a contemporary narrative that differs significantly in form and purpose from traditional folktales.

In addition to identifying narrative functions, the study also examines the seven character roles, or what Propp refers to as “spheres of action,” including the hero, villain, helper, donor, dispatcher, false hero, and princess. Each character in the story is analyzed based on their structural role rather than moral or psychological qualities. For instance, Mary Maloney, who could be seen as a criminal from a moral perspective, structurally plays the role of the *hero*, as she undergoes transformation and propels the story toward resolution.

The analysis further considers elements of narrative subversion—how *Lamb to the Slaughter* not only follows Propp’s framework but also inverts or challenges it. Thus, this research is not limited to structural classification but includes evaluative and reflective dimensions on the effectiveness of Propp’s framework in analyzing modern literature.

Primary data for this research is drawn directly from the text of *Lamb to the Slaughter*, supported by theoretical references including Propp’s original work and contemporary narratological literature by scholars such as Christopher Booker (2004), Marie-Laure Ryan (2007), and Toolan (2001). This approach aims to demonstrate that classical Proppian theory remains relevant for

analyzing contemporary narratives, especially when applied critically and contextually.

In conclusion, this methodology prioritizes detailed and systematic textual analysis within a morphological framework, seeking to uncover how *Lamb to the Slaughter* not only follows a coherent narrative structure but also delivers irony, subversion, and gender complexity through its unique narrative strategies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Character Functions and Their Subversive Interpretations

To further understand how *Lamb to the Slaughter* aligns with and simultaneously challenges traditional narrative structures, this section maps each character onto Vladimir Propp’s seven spheres of action. These roles—originally developed to analyze Russian folktales—serve as a structural lens through which character functions can be identified. However, in Dahl’s modern context, these functions are often inverted or subverted, particularly in ways that critique social norms and gender expectations. The following table outlines the key characters and their corresponding Proppian roles, along with interpretations that highlight the narrative’s ironic and subversive strategies.

Table 1. Proppian Character Roles and Subversive Readings

Proppian Role	Character	Interpretation
Hero	Mary Maloney	Mary’s journey follows the hero arc—not toward justice or rescue, but toward self-preservation. Unlike traditional heroes who restore order, Mary subverts it to construct a new personal reality (Booker, 2004). Her act of murder is her “departure,” while her successful deception is her “victory.”
Villain	Patrick Maloney	Though Patrick is the victim in a literal sense, structurally he functions as the villain. His request for divorce shatters Mary’s world, violating the unstated marital contract. His betrayal, subtle but devastating, creates the “lack” necessary for the story’s propulsion (Propp, 1968).
Helper	Frozen leg of lamb	The object of murder becomes the instrument of liberation and concealment—fulfilling both the magical agent and helper role. This mirrors folklore where enchanted objects aid heroes (Propp, 1968), but

		here the aid is used for moral evasion.
Donors	Sam (grocer), forensic team	These characters unintentionally support Mary's narrative. Sam provides the alibi while the forensic doctor confirms false assumptions, revealing a critique of institutional authority. Their ignorance becomes an ironic mechanism of the "gift" Propp describes.
False Heroes	Police investigators	Tasked with delivering justice, they instead become instruments of Mary's triumph. They unknowingly aid the villainous-hero. This inversion demonstrates how Dahl weaponizes irony against male-dominated systems of law.
Dispatcher	Patrick	His decision to abandon Mary triggers her transformation, acting as a structural dispatcher in Propp's terms, though he is unaware of this narrative consequence.
Princess (Reward)	Freedom / Justice	The "reward" Mary seeks is not romantic union or material gain, but freedom from culpability and social disgrace. The subversion lies in how she acquires it: not by overcoming evil, but by embodying it.

This role analysis reveals how Dahl manipulates traditional structures to criticize gender norms, institutional blindness, and the limits of justice. The reader is made complicit in Mary's victory, disturbed by cheering on a criminal due to the structural roles she occupies.

Narrative Functions and Their Sequence

Using Propp's 31 functions, the story demonstrates significant alignment—though with notable irony:

Table 2. Proppian Narrative Functions in the Story

Propp's Function	Event in the Story	Commentary
Initial Situation	Mary as a content housewife	Echoes the folktale "stable world" before disruption.
Absentation	Patrick withdraws emotionally	Precedes the formal betrayal; a common signal of looming change.
Interdiction	Implied: Marital loyalty and emotional dependence	Though unstated, marriage functions as a silent interdiction.
Violation	Patrick announces divorce	Breaks the emotional and social code.
Villainy	Emotional abandonment, hints of infidelity	Functions as betrayal that justifies Mary's subsequent action.
Mediation	Mary reacts, collapses internally	The function of awareness—a moment of narrative pivot.
Counteraction	Retrieves frozen lamb	Decision-making phase: hero prepares to act.
Departure	Kills Patrick	Moment of agency and

		irreversible transformation.
Trickery	Visits grocer, acts normal	Constructs alibi, manipulates social trust.
Complicity	Grocer, police affirm her story	Reflects societal willingness to believe appearances.
Struggle	Maintains composure under questioning	Though not physical, this is a psychological and performative struggle.
Victory	Police eat the lamb	Symbolic and literal destruction of evidence.
Recognition	Readers recognize her deception; police do not	This is where Dahl amplifies dramatic irony.
Punishment	None (subverted)	Here Dahl critiques justice as fallible and manipulable.

Not all 31 functions are needed; many modern narratives compress them. However, this sequence retains Propp's essential shape: a rupture (lack), response (departure and trickery), and resolution (victory, ironic recognition).

CONCLUSION

Lamb to the Slaughter masterfully demonstrates how modern narratives can mirror classical folktale structures while simultaneously subverting their moral codes. Through a detailed Proppian analysis, it becomes evident that Dahl retains the scaffolding of traditional storytelling—complete with hero, helper, and villain roles—but manipulates them to challenge norms around justice, gender, and authority.

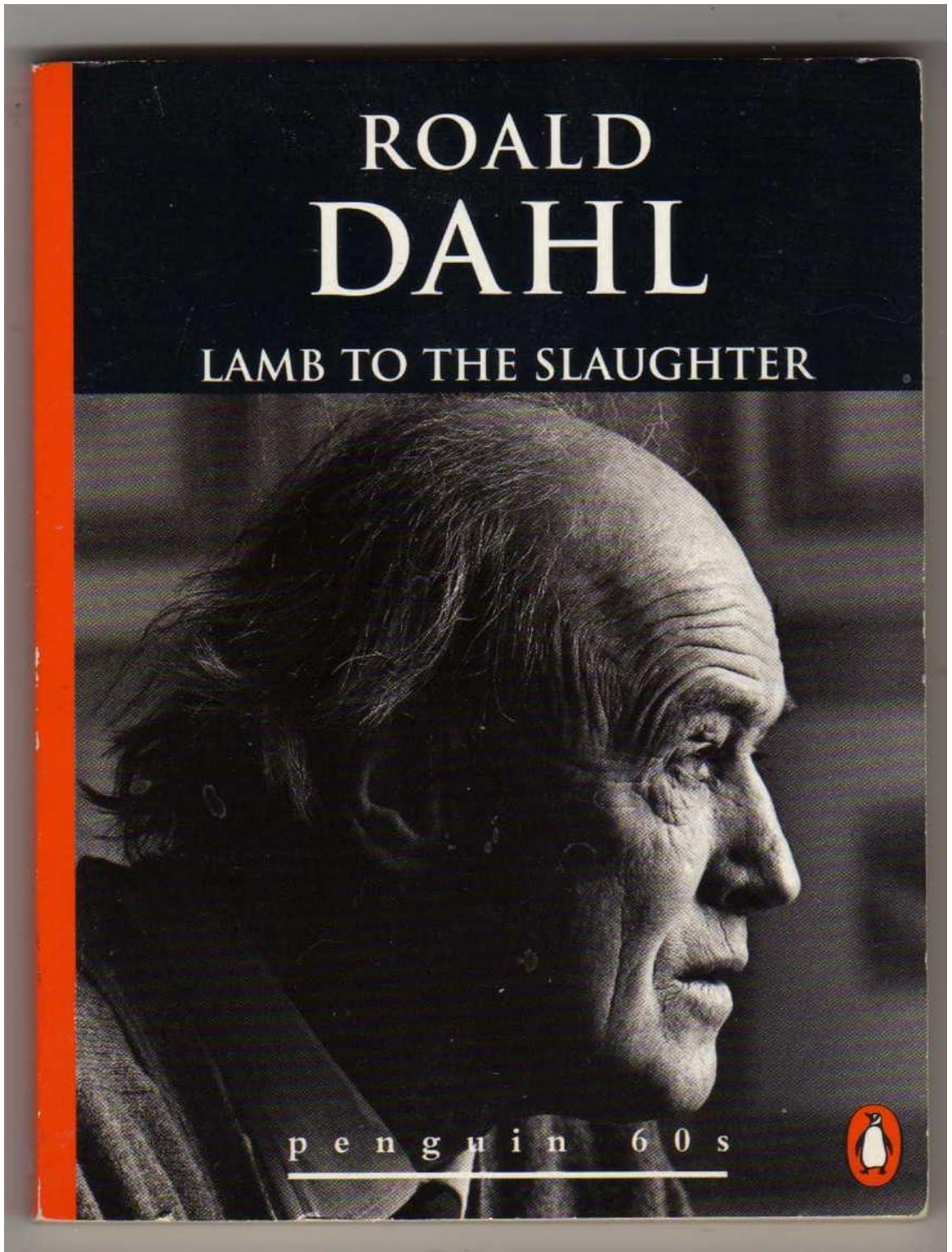
Mary Maloney's transformation from submissive wife to manipulative anti-hero underscores how structural tools like Propp's morphology can reveal more than pattern—they expose ideology, irony, and power. The functions remain; the values invert. Dahl's short story becomes a contemporary folktale of vengeance and deception, repackaged in the quiet horror of the domestic.

This analysis confirms that Vladimir Propp's theory is not confined to ancient tales, but persists as a powerful interpretive lens for modern literary criticism. It enables readers and scholars to uncover narrative skeletons beneath emotional flesh—especially in stories where the boundaries between heroism and villainy are provocatively blurred.

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APPENDIX



Teacher Text 1a

A Twist in the Tale
Lamb to the Slaughter

Lamb to the Slaughter

by Roald Dahl

The room was warm and clean, the curtains drawn, the two table lamps alight - hers and the one by the empty chair opposite. On the sideboard behind her, two tall glasses, soda water, whisky. Fresh ice cubes in the Thermos bucket.

Mary Maloney was waiting for her husband to come home from work.

Now and again she would glance up at the clock, but without anxiety, merely to please herself with the thought that each minute gone by made it nearer the time when he would come. There was a slow smiling air about her, and about everything she did. The drop of the head as she bent over her sewing was curiously tranquil. Her skin - for this was her sixth month with child - had acquired a wonderful translucent quality, the mouth was soft and the eyes, with their new placid look, seemed larger, darker than before.

When the clock said ten minutes to five, she began to listen and a few moments later, punctually as always she heard the tyres on the gravel outside, and the car door slamming, the footsteps passing the window, the key turning in the lock. She laid aside her sewing, stood up, and went forward to kiss him as he came in.

'Hullo, darling,' she said.

'Hullo,' he answered.

She took his coat and hung it in the closet. Then she walked over and made the drinks, a strongish one for him, a weak one for herself; and soon she was back again in her chair with the sewing, and he in the other, opposite, holding the tall glass with both his hands, rocking it so the ice cubes tinkled against the side.

For her, this was always a blissful time of day. She knew he didn't want to speak much until the first drink was finished, and she, on her side, was content to sit quietly, enjoying his

company after the long hours alone in the house. She loved to luxuriate in the presence of this man, and to feel - almost as a sunbather feels the sun - that warm male glow that came out of him to her when they were alone together. She loved him for the way he sat loosely in a chair, for the way he came in a door, or moved slowly across the room with long strides. She loved the intent, far look in his eyes when they rested on her, the funny shape of the mouth, and especially the way he remained silent about his tiredness, sitting still with himself until the whisky had taken some of it away.

'Tired, darling?'

'Yes,' he said. 'I'm tired.' And as he spoke, he did an unusual thing. He lifted his glass and drained it in one swallow although there was still half of it, at least half of it, left. She wasn't really watching him but she knew what he had done because she heard the ice cubes falling back against the bottom of the empty glass when he lowered his arm. He paused a moment, leaning forward in the chair, then he got up and went slowly over to fetch himself another.

'I'll get it!' she cried, jumping up.

'Sit down,' he said.

When he came back, she noticed that the new drink was dark amber with the quantity of whisky in it.

'Darling, shall I get your slippers?'

'No.'

She watched him as he began to sip the dark yellow drink, and she could see little oily swirls in the liquid because it was so strong.

'I think it's a shame,' she said, 'that when a policeman gets to be as senior as you, they keep him walking about on his feet all day long.'

He didn't answer, so she bent her head again and went on with her sewing; but each time he lifted the drink to his lips, she heard the ice cubes clinking against the side of the glass.

'Darling,' she said. 'Would you like me to get

Teacher Text 1b

A Twist in the Tale

Lamb to the Slaughter

you some cheese? I haven't made any supper because it's Thursday.'

'No,' he said.

'If you're too tired to eat out,' she went on, 'it's still not too late. There's plenty of meat and stuff in the freezer, and you can have it right here and not even move out of the chair.' Her eyes waited on him for an answer, a smile, a little nod, but he made no sign.

'Anyway,' she went on, 'I'll get you some cheese and crackers first.'

'I don't want it,' he said.

She moved uneasily in her chair, the large eyes still watching his face. 'But you must have supper. I can easily do it here. I'd like to do it. We can have lamb chops. Or pork. Anything you want. Everything's in the freezer.'

'Forget it,' he said.

'But, darling, you *must* eat! I'll fix it anyway, and then you can have it or not, as you like.' She stood up and placed her sewing on the table by the lamp.

'Sit down,' he said. 'Just for a minute, sit down.' It wasn't till then that she began to get frightened.

'Go on,' he said. 'Sit down.' She lowered herself back slowly into the chair, watching him all the time with those large, bewildered eyes. He had finished the second drink and was staring down into the glass, frowning. 'Listen,' he said, 'I've got something to tell you.'

'What is it, darling? What's the matter?'

He had become absolutely motionless, and he kept his head down so that the light from the lamp beside him fell across the upper part of his face leaving the chin and mouth in shadow. She noticed there was a little muscle moving near the corner of his left eye.

'This is going to be a bit of a shock to you, I'm afraid,' he said. 'But I've thought about it a good deal and I've decided the only thing to do is tell you right away. I hope you won't blame me too much.' And he told her. It didn't take long, four or five minutes at most, and she sat very still through it all, watching him with a kind of dazed horror as he went further and further away from her with each word.

'So there it is,' he added. 'And I know it's kind of a bad time to be telling you, but there simply wasn't any other way. Of course I'll give you money and see you're looked after. But there needn't really be any fuss. I hope not anyway. It wouldn't be very good for my job.'

Her first instinct was not to believe any of it, to reject it all. It occurred to her that perhaps he hadn't even spoken, that she herself had imagined the whole thing. Maybe, if she went about her business and acted as though she hadn't been listening, then later, when she sort of woke up again, she might find none of it had ever happened.

'I'll get the supper,' she managed to whisper, and this time he didn't stop her. When she walked across the room she couldn't feel her feet touching the floor. She couldn't feel anything at all - except a slight nausea and a desire to vomit. Everything was automatic now - down the stairs to the cellar, the light switch, the deep freeze, the hand inside the cabinet taking hold of the first object it met. She lifted it out, and looked at it. It was wrapped in paper, so she took off the paper and looked at it again. A leg of lamb.

All right then, they would have lamb for supper. She carried it upstairs, holding the thin bone-end of it with both her hands, and as she went through the living-room, she saw him standing over by the window with his back to her, and she stopped.

'For God's sake,' he said, hearing her, but not turning round. 'Don't make supper for me. I'm going out.'

At that point, Mary Maloney simply walked up behind him and without any pause she swung the big frozen leg of lamb high in the air and brought it down as hard as she could on the back of his head. She might just as well have hit him with a steel club. She stepped back a pace, waiting, and the funny thing was that he remained standing there for at least four or five seconds, gently swaying. Then he crashed to the carpet.

The violence of the crash. The noise, the small table overturning, helped bring her out of the

Pupil Sheet 5b

A Twist in the Tale
Hey You Down There! Part 3

Hey You Down There!

which was soon to happen. Finally Calvin glanced at the wall clock, yawned widely, and tapped out his pipe. Ignoring Dora, he went out to the hole. In spite of her terrible fear, Dora could not resist following him. It was as if some power outside herself forced her to go.

The winch was already reeling the cable when she got to the hole. It seemed only seconds before the oil drum was up. The grin on Calvin's face was broad as he reached out over the hole and dragged the drum to the edge. A look of utter disbelief replaced the grin as he looked into it. His Adam's apple seemed to vibrate under his red-skinned throat, and once again part of Dora's mind tried to recall what it was that Calvin reminded her of. Calvin was making flat, bawling sounds like a lost calf. He hauled the drum out of the hole and dumped its contents on the ground. The flashlights, many of them dented and with lenses broken, made a sizeable pile.

With a tremendous kick Calvin sent flashlights flying in all directions. One, with a note attached, landed at Dora's feet. Either Calvin was so blinded by rage that he didn't see it, or he assumed it was written in the same unreadable script as the first note.

'You down there!' he screamed into the hole. 'You filthy swine! I'll fix you. I'll make you sorry you ever double-crossed me. I'll... I'll...' He dashed for the house and Dora hastily snatched up the note.

You are even more stupid than we thought. Your clumsy death rays are useless to us. We informed you of this. We want turkey. Send us turkey immediately.

GLR, THE MASTER

She crumpled the note swiftly as Calvin came from the house with his double-barrelled shotgun. For a moment, Dora thought that he knew everything and was about to kill her.

'Please, Calvin,' she said.

'Shut up,' said Calvin. 'You saw me work the winch. Can you do it?'

'Why, yes, but what...?'

'Listen to me. I'm going down there to fix those dirty foreigners. You send me down and bring me up.' He seized Dora by the shoulder. 'And if

you mess things up, I'll fix you too! I'll really and truly fix you.' Dora nodded dumbly.

Calvin put his gun in the oil drum and pushed it to the centre of the hole. Then, hanging on to the cable, he carefully lowered himself into the drum.

'Give me just one hour to run those dirty rats down, then bring me back up,' he said. Dora threw the switch and the oil drum went down. When the cable slackened, she stopped the winch. She spent most of the next hour praying that Calvin would not find the people down there and become a murderer.

Exactly an hour later, Dora started the oil drum upward. The motor laboured mightily as though under a tremendous strain, and the cable seemed stretched almost to breaking point.

Dora gasped when the oil drum came into view. Calvin was not in it! She shut off the motor and hastened to the drum, half expecting to find Calvin crouching down inside. But Calvin was not there. Instead there were scores of gold bars and on top of them a sheet of the familiar white parchment.

'Land sakes,' Dora said, as she took in a full view of the drum's contents. She had no idea of the value of the treasure upon which she gazed. She only knew it must be immense. Carefully, she reached down and picked out the note, which she read in her slow, precise way.

Not even the exquisite flavour of the chicken compares to the incomparable goodness of the live turkey you sent down to us. We must confess that we thought turkey would be rather different from this, but this does not matter.

So delicious was the turkey that we are again sending you a bonus payment. We beg you to send us more turkey immediately.

GLR, THE MASTER

Dora read the note a second time to make sure she understood it fully.

'Well, I declare,' she said in considerable wonder. 'I do declare.'