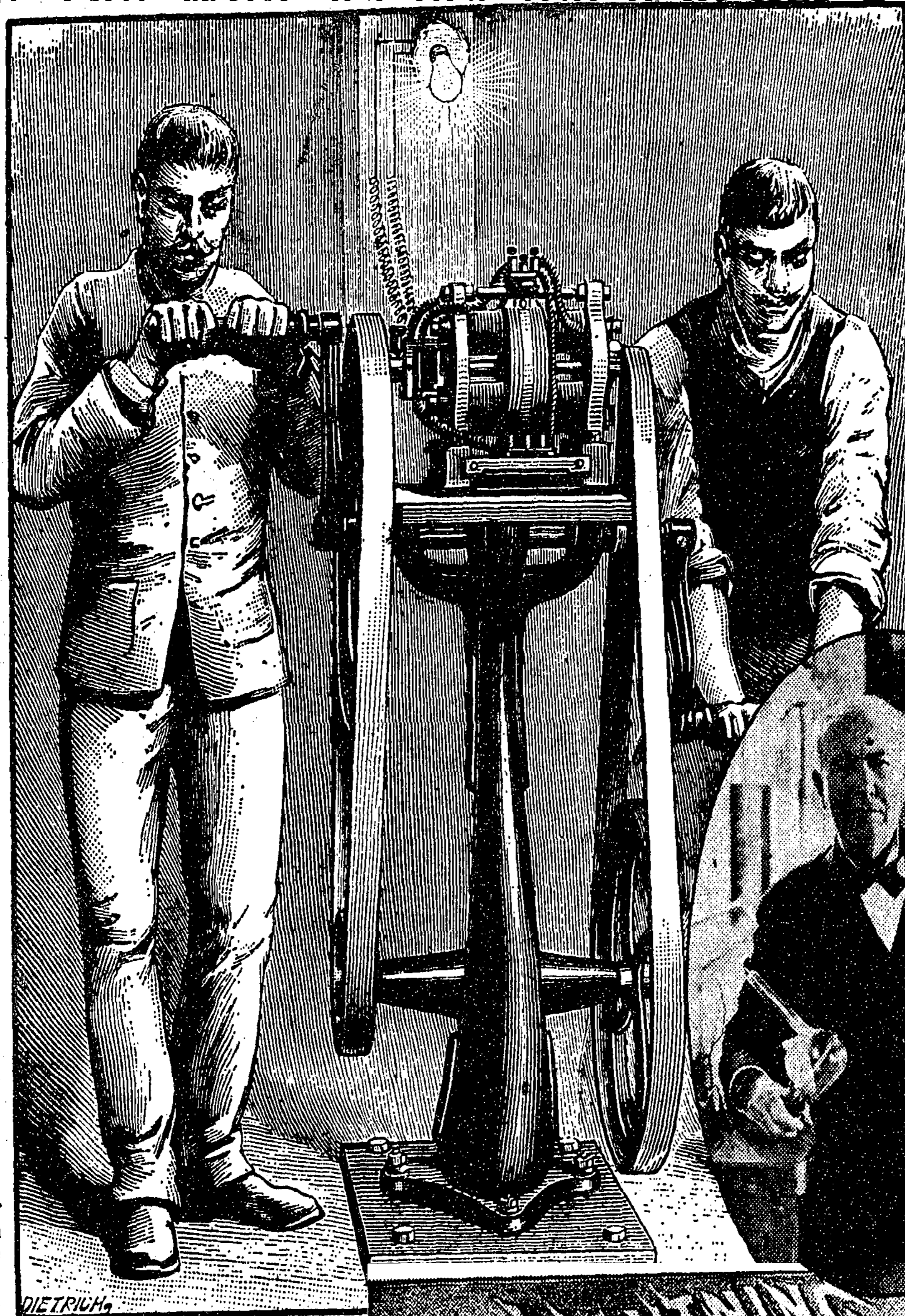


Once upon a time, Con Edison made a big mistake in Jean Stafford's gas bill. Well, she's a writer, and relishes a good fight. But wait let her tell it in her own words:



Left, a dynamo is cranked. Below, Thomas Edison in his laboratory.

EAST HAMPTON, N. Y.

On quitting New York City in 1957 where I had been living under the name Jean Stafford, I asked Consolidated Edison to send my final bill. Instead of a bill, I received a check for six cents, which represented, I supposed, what was left of my deposit. I kept it, partly as a curio, partly in the hope that in a wee way I could bollix up the company books, and partly because I thought it might come in handy some day in one way or another. Eleven years later, thanks to my mean-spirited foresight, I was able to use it as a tactical diversion in a battle I fought with and won from Con Ed.

In the spring of 1968, having spent a miserable ten months in a stygian sublet in the East 80's, calling myself Mrs. A. J. Liebling, I once again asked to settle my account with the Diggers Who Must. When the bill came, I read it with interest and in detail; I read it in artificial light and I took it outdoors and read it in the sun; I read it with and without a magnifying glass; each time I saw the same incontrovertible figures.

Over a period of 27 days I had, according to the computers in Charles F. Luce's busy concern, used up \$6.32 worth of electricity and \$409.28 of cooking gas, but, because I had a credit of \$8.03 from the month before, the total came only to \$407.57 instead of \$415.60.

I had the bill and the old check for six cents Xeroxed and then I sat down to write Chief Luce a seventeen-page letter. I began:

"The originals of these unusual documents are at the frame shop. They will hang, well lit by LILCO, in some conspicuous part of my house in Suffolk County on Long Island. Let me explain that while I am Mrs. A. J. Liebling, in debt to you for your clean energy to the tune of \$407.57, I am also, professionally, Jean Stafford (I am a writer and am not to be confused with Jo Stafford, the popular singer) to whom you owe six cents. Perhaps I could apply the latter to the former.

"I am a widow and I live alone. My breakfast consists of coffee, made in an electric percolator, and fruit. I do not eat lunch. In the city I seldom dine in but when I do, I cook something simple on top of the stove or I have 'finger-food,' as my mother would have called it, sent in from a delicatessen.

"I have a very long history (I was born in 1915) of somnambulism and it could be argued that between April 29 and May 25, I used up \$401.25 worth of cooking gas running a short-order house and snack bar in my sleep for the operators of your pneumatic drills. The facts, however, cannot support this proposition. For example, my grocery bill for that period came to \$41.77—that may seem steep, considering how little I eat, but what I do eat is always of prime quality. No matter where I live, my butcher who is also my cat's meat man is listed in my personal telephone book simply as 'Tiffany.'

"There is, of course, the possibility that there might have been a leak in my two-burner stove, but in that event, don't you imagine I would be dead?"

Chairman Luce and his subalterns had no way of knowing that the only entries I make in my engagement book are appointments with my dentist, my C.P.A., the doctors in charge of my giblets, of my eyes and my bones and my skin; and the hours of the departure of planes taking me away from my gas stove, my light bulbs and my electric blanket. So I felt free to describe, with a wealth of needless detail, where and with whom I had been each evening but two during the time in question. My companions had all been illustri-

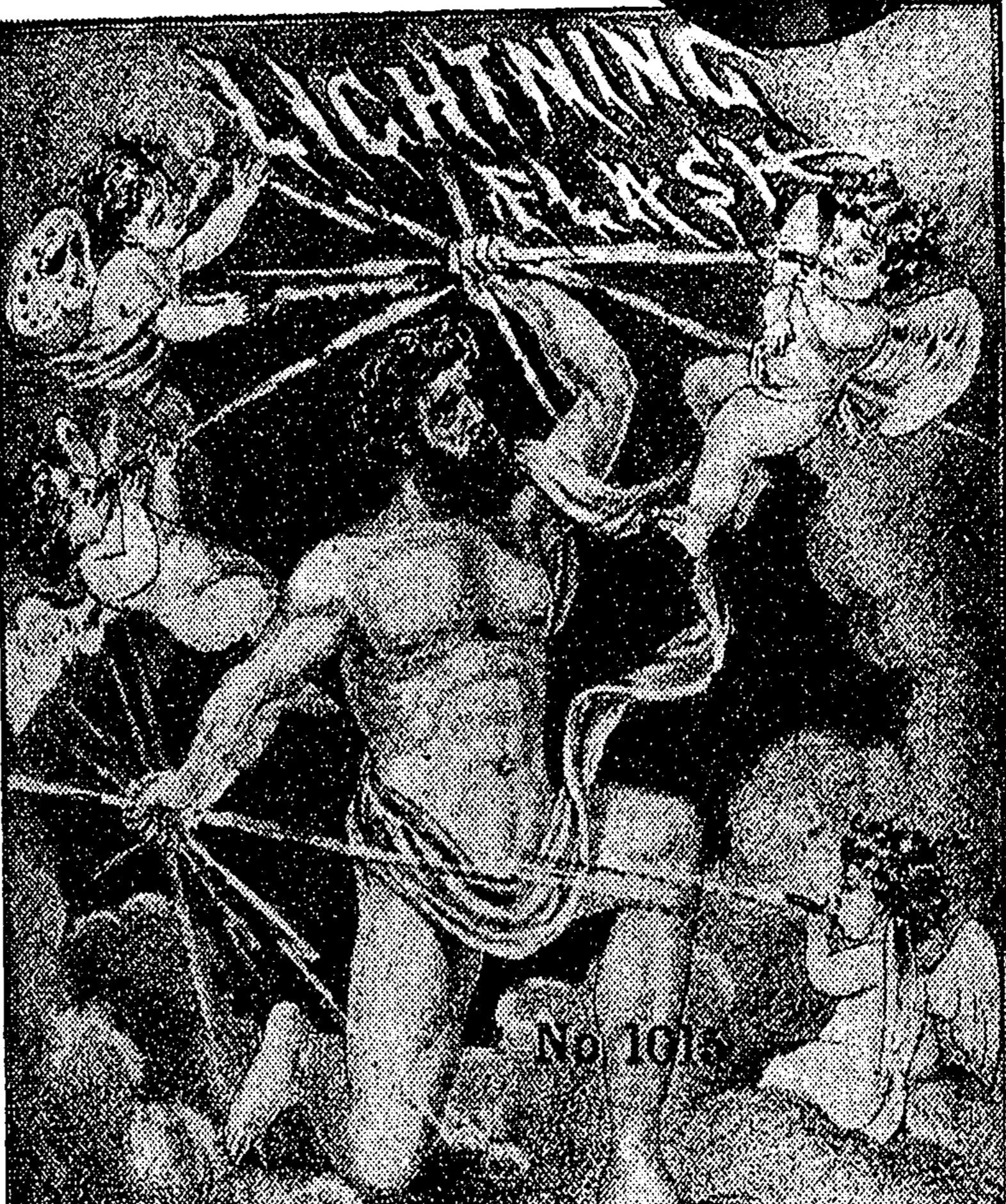
and the physical sciences, jurisprudence, medicine and high finance. We had eaten ambrosia and drunk nectar in the smartest possible restaurants or in the dining rooms of splendidly appointed houses or apartments where Cezannes and Corots hung, where Aubussons and Sarouks lay and Chippendale and Queen Anne stood. These interiors reminded me of others I had seen or read about and I was happy to share my memories with my interlocutor—not, of course, that he was getting a word in edgewise.

I had in truth spent one weekend in Boston and another at my own house in the country, and in the course of one of those weeks, I had been in Nashville for two days and two nights. My weekend in Boston led me to nostalgic reminiscences of people I had known there and in all other parts of New England during the forties; the trip to Nashville caused me to discourse at length on the Southern Fugitive group and my association with them.

Relevant to nothing at all, I said: "While I am writing to you, let me say a few words about a building you rent to Columbia University. It is known as Myles Cooper and is situated at 440 West 110th Street and it houses The School of the Arts where, while I was living in the city, I held a seminar. Myles Cooper is the most appalling place I have ever worked in and I have worked in some mighty appalling places. You should have seen my office at 'The Southern Review' at Louisiana State University where I was secretary . . ."

I named the distinguished editors, the distinguished contributors and described the parties held when the distinguished contributors came to call on the distinguished editors in Baton Rouge. I went into the pesky vermin of Louisiana, the tragic beauty of the antebellum houses, Spanish moss and the Long family.

Eventually I got back to Myles Cooper but then digressed, with many cross-references to colleagues, to talk of my offices on other campuses. Then back to Myles Cooper and to Tho-



Cigar-box label of the 1860's.

East 80th Street. I went into the woful state of higher education. I concluded by wishing many years of health and prosperity for Mr. Luce and his.

My several verbose postscripts were followed by brief biographies of all the notables, in addition to those I had mentioned in the letter, to whom I was sending copies.

Ten days later I got a bill from Consolidated Edison for \$407.57.

Now I was impatient. I wrote brusquely: "In my earlier letter, I told you to get your computers overhauled. Do as I say and do so instantly."

Two weeks went by and then one morning, a trembly-voiced Mr. Poltroon telephoned me from New York City to say that there had been a

mate. "An estimate of what?" I demanded so loudly that my cat who had been spot-cleaning his gloves at my feet scattered upstairs. "An estimate for Nedick's?"

The poor bloke tried to explain how the estimates were made, but the procedure is so tortuous, so idiosyncratically imaginative, that, at my suggestion, Mr. Poltroon gave up and went on to say that, in fact, Con Ed owed me 23 cents. I would not get the check, he was sorry to say, for ten days or two weeks and he sincerely hoped I would not be inconvenienced.

Two days later, Mr. P. was back on the hooter asking me to return the 1957 check for six cents. I refused. Testily. I said I thought I was to get a check for 23 cents; he said

yes, but the company would like to combine the two so that I would get 29 cents. I told him nothing doing.

All through the summer Mr. Poltroon called me long distance every four or five days: If I got a bill for \$3.67, I was to ignore it—it was a mistake. Had I got my check for 23 cents? Wouldn't I please turn loose my check for six cents? Each time he identified himself, I said, "Oh, Mr. Poltroon, could you hang on a sec? There's somebody at my back door."

Then I'd go out to the kitchen and make myself a bacon-and-tomato sandwich, work the daily crossword puzzle, comb the cat and sterilize a few Mason jars for canning watermelon pickles. He was always waiting for me when I moseyed back to the telephone; and before he could say a word, I'd tell him that I'd been in conversation with the plumber (I talked about sump-pumps, cesspools, elbows, Stillson wrenches, hard water, the high incidence of silverfish in the bathrooms of Monteagle, Tenn.) or the tree men (had Mr. Poltroon ever had trouble with fire-blight on his Japanese quince or powdery mildew on his mimosa?).

Toward the end of August, the calls stopped, but on the Tuesday after Labor Day, Mr. Poltroon rang up to apologize for not having been in touch for so long—he'd been away, he'd needed a rest.

Before I could compassionately inquire about his present condition, there was a knock at the back door and I had to leave him to confer with the cablevision man, to run up a batch of vichyssoise and to rearrange the spice shelf. Faithful Poltroon was still at the other end of the wire. His respiration was shallow; I didn't like the sound of it at all. Had I got my money from Con Ed yet? I hadn't? That was the limit! His voice belied the indignation of his words: It was wanting the timbre of a healthy man.

I never heard that voice again. But late in September a Mr. Bandersnatch S. Pecksniff wrote:

"Mr. C. E. Poltroon informed me of his telephone conversation in which he explained the circumstances resulting in the issuance of our inaccurate billing. We have special programing and instructions to prevent such situations. I am sorry that these instructions were not followed in this instance.

"Enclosed are the two checks which Mr. Poltroon spoke to you about. I do hope you will cash them promptly and enable us to balance your account."

There was an imploring note, I felt, in that last sentence. Although the letter was dated Sept. 24, the new check for six cents (payable to Mrs. A. J. Liebling. Why? Con Ed had owed and had paid Miss Stafford six cents in 1957 but they didn't owe Mrs. L. six cents in 1968) was dated Aug. 8 and the one for 23 cents had been made out on Sept. 6. My case had clearly consumed far more clerical time than I had consumed gas.

The three checks and the amazing bill are framed and hang in my downstairs bathroom. I'm not sure yet, but I have a hunch that by and by I'll have to make room for another set of similar testaments under glass. For I have discovered that the Long Island Lighting Company, far from being Con Ed's easy-going country cousin, is his blood brother, foxy, avaricious and, not to put too fine a point on it, uppity. If he gets too far out of line—and he seems aimed in that direction—I may have to read him the riot act, in no uncertain terms.

Jean Stafford won a Pulitzer Prize in 1970 for her collected short stories. Although she never has more than a 20-watt bulb burning at any time and now does all her cooking over a busen burner, her most recent monthly bill from LILCO for gas and electricity came to \$121.26.