

By Mack McConnell

## Planning to battle the brown monster

The brown monster scowls as I stand there looking at it with trepidation. Its shabby skin is peeling, its frame sagging, it glares at me with one enormous eye. It seems to know that it and I will do battle in the not-to-distant future. It seems grimly confident.

A knot of fear rises in my stomach as I ask myself, "Who do you think you are, Bob Villa? This thing will break you and make you whine like a whipped puppy."

But proceed I must. Just as Frodo Baggins had to carry the ring, fighting monsters along the way. So must I transform this Gollum-like creature into something my fair damsel will love and cherish.

Actually, the monster is a house, the house my wife, Julie, grew up in. The one big eye is a picture window peeking around shrubbery which, like the house, has become wild and ugly through neglect. I am sure that the house and the vegetation will only get wilder and more ugly in the year that stands between me and retirement. We occasionally attempt to do a little cleaning and repair on it but it is a couple of hundred miles away and we can't get there often. A kindly neighbor mows the grass.

My father-in-law is deceased and my mother-in-law, who is 94, moved from the house to a nursing home over a decade ago. Julie and her sister, Alice, and brother, Jack, who jointly own the house, couldn't bear to see anyone but family live in it, so it remains vacant. Julie and I are buying Alice's and Jack's interest in her house and it is to become our retirement home.

It was a flip-of-the-coin decision whether to bulldoze the shack or renovate and remodel it. Anyone who has considered building a house lately realizes it is cheaper to buy a small third world country and go live there. So it is that I shall move into said shanty and endeavor to make it,

liveable?

"No, not liveable?" Julie says. "You will make it nice, comfortable and cozy."

"Or die trying," is my reply.

"I have confidence in you," she says.

She has so much confidence in my fixer upper talents that she doesn't intend to be anywhere near me or the house when I tear into it.

She is abandoning me this fall and moving to Portland, Oregon under the guise of going to live with my son and his wife and help care for soon-to-arrive twin granddaughters.

It was a tough decision for her, not because she will miss me but because it is going to be difficult to make sure I don't screw up from a thousand miles away. Even though I have promised not to do anything stupid like plumbing or electrical wiring, she fears I will take a triple gainer off a ladder or board myself into a room or something.

She dreads getting the next-of-kin call that may go something like this: "Mrs. McConnell, I am sorry to have to inform you that your husband has passed away."

"Oh my gawd, what killed him?"

"He died of exhaustion."

"How did that happen?"

"Well, it appears he accidentally nailed one foot to the floor and walked around in circles until he collapsed."

"What about the house?"

"What do you mean what about the house?"

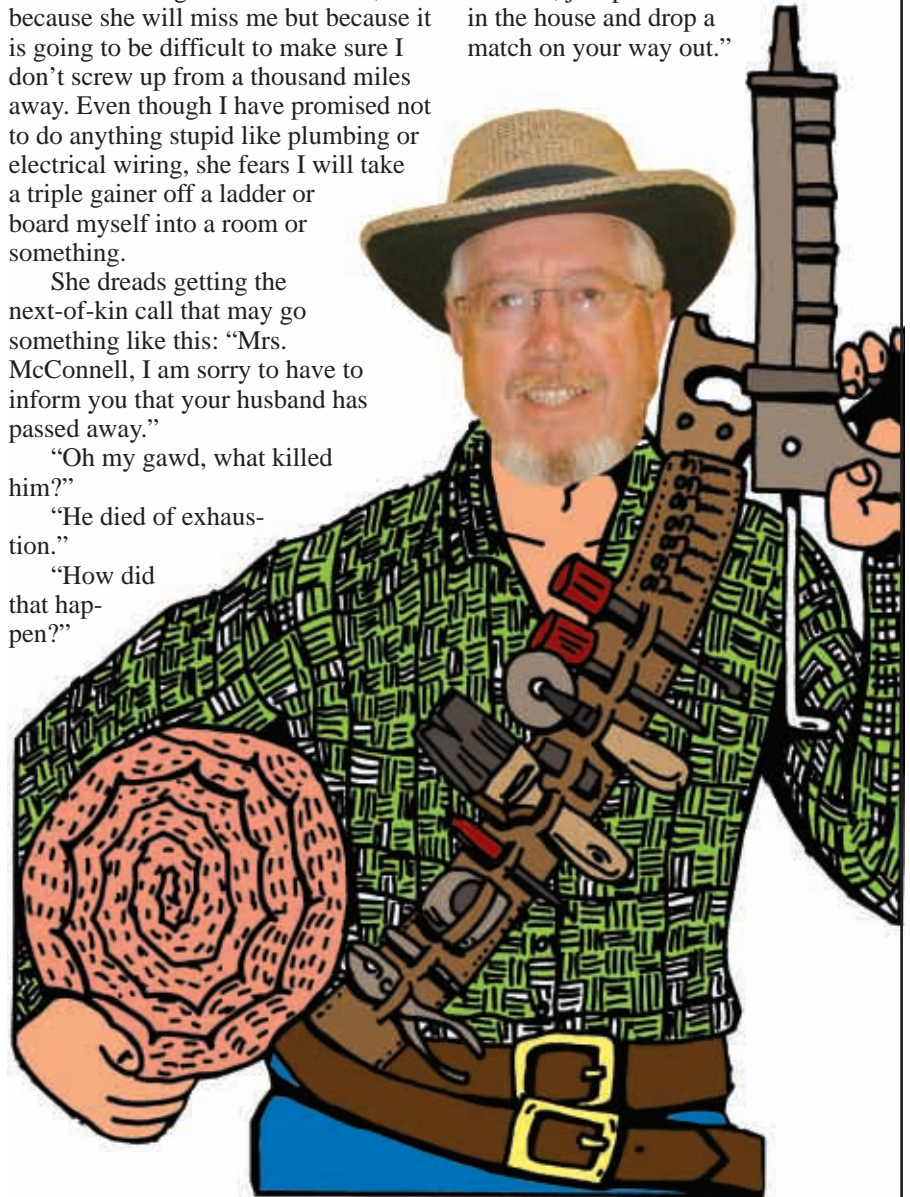
"Is it finished, is it nice and comfortable and cozy?"

"No Mam, actually it looks like your husband went crazy and started attacking the house with a crowbar. By the way, what do you want done with the body?"

"He wanted to be cremated."

"Do you want us to take him to a crematorium?"

"No, just put him back in the house and drop a match on your way out."



Mack McConnell's hilarious book "Never Grab a Cockatiel" is available by sending \$6 plus \$1.50 for postage and handling to Rural Montana Books, Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403.