MARION TAYLOR

WHIZ

850 on your Radio Dial

Here we have the experiences of a high-spirited young lady working for a small commercial radio station in the United States of America.

Marion Taylor certainly met some queer folk: Miss Hattye, the proprietress of an antediluvian Beauty Parlour; Aunt Maggie and Aunt Mollie in "Over the Back Fence" with their cookery recipes ("yum, yum"); the corpulent and elderly *beau* Wilbur Slemmons, whose manner was "paternal with a touch of

(overleaf)

incest"; Miss Persis Crowe and her "Elizabethan Hour" that swamped the Shakespearian text with annotations culled from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; and many others, mostly comic but some pathetic.

This is the author's first book; but she has acquired a distinctive style and an enviable felicity of phrase, e.g. (of a certain dissolute Lothario) "his eyes flashed sparks, and underneath were bags to catch the sparks."

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by

MARION TAYLOR

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Chapter One

SCRIPTS AND BABY

I HAVE never hunted for gold in the Yukon when it was fifty below zero and wolves howled off the ice-pans. Nor have I fought my way through steaming, fever-ridden jungles, where boa constrictors bounced off my head, and I had to wade through smelly swamps that came up to my armpits. I have never lazed on tropical isles in the golden sunlight, with mangoes falling into my lap and brown boys making love to me. Nor have I seen the wonders of India, Siam, or Cathay. Once, just once, I took a trip to Europe, but it was only a pasteurised little summer tour for school-teachers called the Happy Hours Vacation.

No, about the only things that ever happened to me is that I married a soldier, had a son, and worked in a radio station in a small town in Michigan during the war. But there I had a lot of adventures that come under the usual classifications of smiles, laughs, and tears. And I also met a lot of people in that radio station. And it's the people who matter, whether you meet them in Cairo, Timbuktu, England, or Michigan.

I didn't know it at the time, but my adventures in radio started while I was still expounding the beauties of Shakespeare and Emerson in a teachers' college in Illinois. In those days I had as a student a girl by the name of Bootsy North. The state of Illinois spent

quite a bit of tax-money trying to make a pedagogue out of Bootsy. But Bootsy had other ideas. She used all her spare time, and a lot of it that wasn't spare, trying to sell herself to the stage, the movies, vaudeville, stock companies, and radio, in that order. Bootsy had excellent gams, a Hedy Lamarr face, something to plunge with when she wore plunge necklines, a come-hither look in her eye that wouldn't have done a thing for her in radio, and a low, plushy voice that would. On top of that, Bootsy could sing and dance.

Life would have been simple for Bootsy if she hadn't had a ministerial father, who nourished the mesozoic idea that girls went to hell in The Theatah, and started a kind of holy staircase climb to heaven if they taught school. So Bootsy was studying the early dramatists, with side-trip week-ends to contact stock companies, or stage shows in Chicago that needed extras, or radio stations that needed sweeping out. Television was still a chimera in the late 'thirties in the Middle West, so Bootsy left that out of her aspirations. Finally after two years of Shakespeare, Restoration Drama, and side trips, Bootsy landed a berth with radio station WHAM in Springfield. Bootsy with her gams, her come-hither, her plunge, and her seductive voice was hired to tell bedtime stories to children, instruct housewives how to bake cakes and be the stooge for a Chauncey the Corney Cow programme for twenty dollars a week. But at least the job was so dry-cleaned she got her father's consent.

Bootsy sent me blow-by-blow bulletins of her new work, and after I stopped teaching, we still corresponded. Then one rain-soaked morning back in

March, 1942, when I was bulbously pregnant in an army wife apartment in Casper City, Michigan, I got the following telegram (collect) from Bootsy.

SWELL GUY NAMED TOD BURKE HERE IN SPRINGFIELD STARTING HISTORICAL RADIO PROGRAMS ALL OVER UNITED STATES STOP ORGANIZING HIS OWN COMPANY STOP LOCAL BUSINESS MEN FINANCE THE PROGRAMS WHICH TELL THE LOCAL HISTORY OF DIFFERENT TOWNS STOP NEEDS TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS STOP I TOLD TOD YOU USED TO WRITE PLAYS FOR OUR COLLEGE RADIO AND MIGHT CONDESCEND TO TRY A FEW STOP SO TOD WANTS YOU TO TRY A FEW STOP SEND SAMPLE SCRIPTS STOP BIG MONEY STOP WIRE ME AT ONCE STOP BIG TIME STUFF STOP BOOTSY.

"Stop yourself," I thought irritably. "I have to pay for the wire." Then I began to get thrilled. Me a big-time radio writer! This was something I had always dreamed about. So I paid for the wire, sent off an acceptance telegram to Bootsy, and sat down to rip off sample scripts.

A week later I had the job, complete with deadlines. It didn't matter that my stomach resembled a sail in the wind and my walk was Donald Duck's. I began to spend my days and nights in the public library, ferreting out historical material. The good women who doled out the books regarded me first with awe, then with apprehension, then with downright terror.

"You sure you feel all right?" they would ask as they passed the table where I had barricaded myself in with *The History of Michigan by Counties* (in twenty

volumes). And then finally, "What is the name of your doctor?" and "What hospital are you signed up with?" At last the head librarian said in a trembling voice, "We've never had a baby born right here in the library, but there could always be a first time, couldn't there?"

I kept right on sitting on my rubber pillow, jotting down notes. Which was more important? Librarians and their fussy notions, or a brilliant career in radio?

Each time I mailed a fat envelope to Springfield I quivered with delight, thinking about the cheques I was going to get. Big money, Bootsy said. Surely a hundred dollars a script at the lowest. And it could very well be two or three hundred. But I mustn't be mundane enough to take up the matter of pay until I was really solid in with this Tod Burke. And the enthusiastic telegrams I began to receive from him showed I was really getting in solid. "Nice blend of humor and pathos on your first two Casper City numbers. Keep 'em rolling." And "How would you like to branch out and do Parrington, Michigan? Boys landing new contracts every day."

Of course I would be delighted to do Parrington, Michigan. And anything else Tod Burke asked me to do. In a couple of weeks I would be so rich I could buy a diamond-studded rattle for my baby.

I shall never forget the morning I got my first cheque. I could tell by the crackle and the bilious colour shining through the envelope what it was. With that rapt wonder a child feels as he gets out of bed and goes downstairs to see what Santa left him under the Christmas tree, I slit open the flap. Then I felt as though hands were squeezing my Adam's apple. Ten dollars, the cheque

read. For two scripts. Somebody must have forgotten a couple of zeros. My eyes filled with tears. It would be cheaper to starve than to write for this Tod Burke. And what about all my glowing promises to my husband?

But as I sank down on the davenport, my spirits revived a little. When was genius ever appreciated at first blush? Milton got twenty pounds for *Paradise Lost*; Jack London got a stack of rejection slips a foot and a half high before he sold his first story; Stephen Crane had his first work printed at his own expense and couldn't even give the copies away. And here I was getting five dollars a throw for an average of five hours' work. And think of the glory of it. No, I'd pick up my pencils and my rubber pillow and go right back to the public library.

If the doctor could be relied on, the birth of my baby was by now only three weeks off, and here I was with five more scripts for Casper City and all of Parrington on my hands. So I wrote Tod and asked him if there was any way of turning in the material ahead of time, since the way things were going I would land in the hospital. Somehow I could not bring myself to say what for. Tod wrote back he was very sorry about my impending operation, and did I feel well enough to go on with the job? I replied that I felt fine, just send along instructions so that I could get him the scripts before I was laid up.

In the days that followed, I was exceedingly grateful to Tod Burke for Parrington and Casper City. For my soldier husband got orders to go overseas.

Present-day wars and rumours of wars have almost

given World War II the antique, cobwebby cast of the Revolutionary and the Civil Wars. But who of us that have lived through these awful days of 1942 can ever quite forget them? John was a captain; he was stationed at an army post; and ever since Pearl Harbour, men had been leaving in droves. Daily we wives said to ourselves, "The next one to go could be my husband. He can be called at a moment's notice." And yet when the blow fell, it seemed wholly unexpected and unbearable. It was Shylock's cry, "The curse never fell upon our nation till now. I never felt it till now."

It took two-fifths of Scotch and a stiff drive through the countryside before my husband could get up enough nerve to tell me. "What will you do, Kitten, left alone like this? Why did it have to happen to us just now?" John, the chromium Benedict, John, the cold-rolled-steel Bogart, who would rather die than show emotion, was choking with tears.

"I don't know," I said, going numb all over. Then my baby kicked deep inside me, and pain started, and pity, and with it a strange, surging hope. It was as though that little life, so close to the surface now, was whispering, "Tell daddy not to worry about us. Just have him take care of himself."

I threw my arms up around John's neck. "I'm not going to be left alone. I'm going to have a baby, and he and I are going to be fine until you get back."

"Good girl, Kitten. Only I—don't let's talk about it any more. I—I can't stand it."

From then on, whenever John and I were together, we kept up that robot-like gaiety, that deadpan exuber-

ance which is known to the world as a brave front. But days when I was alone in the apartment, I would start to cry. Then I would make myself sit up straight and say sternly, "Quit crying. You have to get down to the library and finish up Casper City, remember?" After that, I would trot off with my pencils and my rubber pillow, not daring to break down before the librarians.

Then came the awful day when John had to move out to the fort for good to help gather the equipment for an overseas army hospital to leave from the West Coast as soon as possible.

The morning of the fifth of May, I reported to the doctor, who told me nothing was going to happen to me for at least two weeks. I pounded out scripts all the rest of the day, mailing the last one at nine o'clock at night.

When I got back to the apartment, the telephone was shrilling. It was John calling from the fort and his voice was crying again. "Where have you been, Kitten? I've been so worried."

"I'm fine. I've been out mailing my last masterpiece."

"Good." There was a long pause, then his voice came again, choked and far away. "Kitten, can you take it? I—I may be shipped tomorrow. I—I love you, Kitten."

I kept the tears out of my voice, but they were streaming down my cheeks. "I love you, too, John. E-Everything's going to be fine. I—I know it is."

There was a pause long as death. Then his voice came again. "I—I hate to ask you, Kitten. But that stuff I put into the cleaner's yesterday. I've got to

take it with me, and I can't get out of here all night. Could you maybe phone and see if the man could send it out, even if it isn't cleaned? Things are so terrible around here, I—I just can't take the time."

"I—I'll try, darling."

Somehow I got my tears stopped and sat down and called the Fine Service Cleaners. Naturally there was no one in the office at nine-thirty at night. So I went downstairs to consult the motherly woman who was my landlady.

She had on her hat and coat, ready to go out. "Mr. Frank Elezear is the owner of the Fine Service Cleaners," she said, gathering up her gloves. "You sure you feel all right, poor thing? 'Stoo bad about your husband going. I'll be glad to stay home from Bridge Club tonight and help you find that cleaning and stay with you, poor thing, if you just say the word. That's just what I'd better do, you about to drop a baby, poor thing, and your husband leaving you and all."

"He's not leaving me. He's just leaving," I said, moronically. "And I'll be perfectly all right. I wouldn't have you miss Bridge Club for anything. I'll get the stuff out of the cleaners, if I have to break a window."

Belinda Monoghan's kindly, well-upholstered face puckered into a washboard of concern. "I don't think you ought to go that far. Tell you what. If you haven't located Mr. Elezear in an hour, call me at Club, poor thing, and I'll call Denny down at Lodge and have him find Mr. Elezear for you."

"Thanks, Mrs. Monoghan, but I don't like to bother your husband either," I said. "You just go ahead

and don't worry about me, and if I need you, I'll surely call you."

"Honest and true?"

"Cross my heart." Then I pattered on back upstairs.

That was undoubtedly the most peripatetic evening Mr. Elezear of the Fine Cleaners had put in for some time. When I called the Elezear residence, a piping child's voice lisped, "Mommy and Dathy ithn't here. They went to the Thmith's for dinner."

"What Smiths?" I asked in desperation.

"I don'th know."

Fifteen Smiths later I found out it was the Marcus Smiths. But I learned to my consternation that the dinner was one of those progressive affairs and the birds had long since flown to the Sam Cochrane's for the second course. When I called the Cochrane's, I found I had missed out on fried chicken and Mr. Elezear by five minutes. The dinner party had moved over to the Brundiges for dessert. From the Brundiges, the party progressed to some tavern. "No'm," the maid said. "I'm sorry, but I got no idea which one."

Bent, but not battered, I called every tavern in town. My quarry turned up at Ye Olde Winde Mille.

Mr. Elezear's voice had a Don Quixotish sound to it, with a heavy overlay of Bacchus. "Yesh, this ishh Mishter Elezear. Oh, sho your hushband ish going oversheash tonight. Well, well, that'sh too bad. But tha'sh wha' we get for shending shrap iron to Japan. But he can't poshibly get oversheash in one night, can he?"

I tried to keep calm in spite of the sweat collecting on my brow. "No, of course not, Mr. Elezear. He

can't even go anywhere if you don't help me get three of his suits out of your cleaning establishment right this evening."

An arch hiccough came from the other end of the wire. "Whyn't we jush shkip the whole shing and keep him at home?"

I started to laugh and cry both at the same time. "Please, Mr. Elezear, you've got to help me."

"Shure, shure. Tell me wha' you do. Call Bill Jenkinsh and tell him I shaid to open up the joint for you and give you anyshing you want. I'd come myshelf, but I'm—er——." Another arch hiccough.

"I understand, Mr. Eleazer. And thanks so much."

Bill Jenkins was at a poker game, but I located him after only three calls. And he not only opened up the joint, but he brought the three uniforms out in his battered Chevvy. I almost kissed him. "If we win this war, it'll be because of fellows like you."

"Pshaw, this ain't nothin'." His eyes strayed to my *embonpoint*. "Looks like you got a little stake in the war yourself." Then he blushed and ran on down the stairs.

I was just calling John to tell him about the suits, when mules started kicking at my stomach. Baby mules, to be sure, and their kicking took the form of rhythmic dance steps with pauses in between. But mules. "Oh, John," I said, hanging on to the telephone. "I'd better get to the hospital."

"Hold everything, Kitten. The colonel says I can take an hour off and go with you."

I went back to the davenport and got into a horizontal position. Somebody was playing Rimsky-Korsakov's

Scheherazade Suite on the radio, and I felt my spirits begin to enter the strange, oriental land of the music. The pains were coming stronger, more rhythmic, now, but they were not horrible. Instead I felt a kind of exaltation, a kind of thrilling sweetness go through me that blended with the exquisite harp music that was the tongue of the Empress Scheherazade. Why does anybody fear this? I wondered. This is the most wonderful sensation I have ever experienced.

John came then, all consternation and gaunt fatigue. "You all right, Kitten? I was so worried I nearly drove into a ditch."

I lifted a shining face. "Not only all right, but I've never felt better." I couldn't repress a giggle. "How disappointed the librarians are going to be that our child isn't going to be born in the Casper City Public Library."

The rest of the night was like a kaleidoscope turning up fanciful pictures. The gleam of hospital walls, the distorted faces bending over me, the shadows dancing down the long halls and on the ceiling of my room, lights that came and went, everywhere the acrid smell of antiseptics. The ecstasy never quite left me, but at times it would be blotted out with nausea and pain. Through it all, coming and going like a will-o'-the-wisp, but yet the most constant thing in the flux of that strange night was the face of John, haggard, yet uplifted, somehow, and proud. Toward dawn, I was wheeled into a big room, and the world became velvety darkness.

I awoke, feeling as though I had been run over by a truck.

"Your husband had to leave, but you have a fine baby boy," a nurse said, bending over me. John gone, probably to be torpedoed at sea, or slain on a battlefield. I began to weep.

"It's hard, I know," the kind voice of the nurse went on. "But wait until you see your baby. He's a honey." Then she went out of the room and brought back a bundle of flying arms and legs. "Here he is."

I shall never forget my wonder and delight as I took the bundle into my arms. Small hands waved. John's hands, done to the life in red satin miniature. Small eyes winked. My eyes, copied from the original by the strokes of a master. Astonishing blend of two people cast into the mould of a doll. But a doll that breathed and had soft flesh. And over the doll hovered a delicious familiarity. It was as though I had seen this little creature so many times before that I knew him as well as I knew the palms of my hands.

I was aroused from my reverie by a soft Scotch voice. I am not very good at dialects, but if you will add three parts Robert Burns to one part Sir James Barrie and shake in an extra handful of burrs, you will get the general effect. "Wha hae you ther-r-re? A buoy or a ger-r-rl?"

I turned and looked over at the other bed in my hospital room for the first time. A woman four feet long and five feet wide with a face as round as a haggis and eyes as bonny and blue as Loch Lomond was lying there, holding a baby four inches long and five inches wide, with a face as round as a haggis, and eyes as bonny and blue as Loch Lomond.

"A boy, so they tell me," I said, hugging my bundle.

"Well, the deil's in it for me. I've got another-r-r ger-r-rl." But she didn't look as though the deil were in it. There was lovelight in her eyes.

"Have you other girls?" I asked, liking her at once.

"Have I. I've got Mar-r-ry Mar-r-garet, aged fifteen, and Heather-r-r Angel, aged twelve, and Ellen Douglas and Wendy Gr-r-aeme, twins, aged seventeen."

"Any boys?" I asked, fondling my own bundle with a pride I couldn't conceal.

"Never-r-r a buoy, and the Mister-r-r cr-r-ryin' his eyes out for one."

"He'll forget about that when he sees her," I comforted. "Besides, the next one may be a boy."

"Nae. I gave up year-r-rs ago."

I tried to beguile her. "Well, there's one thing. You're never going to run out of baby-sitters."

She nodded and hugged her new girl. "The other ger-r-rls, they're that pleased." Then she added in the kind of tone one would use in talking about the weather, "Even if this is the accident baby."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's like this. The Mister-r-r and I decided we had enough ger-r-rls, so we stopped. And then one night we went to a paair-r-rty, and we had a wee bit something, and then another wee bit something, and the first thing you know we——" She stopped and giggled.

I threw back my head and laughed. "The Tale of Mr. and Mrs. Tam O'Shanter. Or too many doch-an-dorrachs."

She beamed. "Richt. An' the first thing you know we went home an' had the accident baby."

At that moment a little man with whiskers and heather-coloured eyes came into the room.

"R-R-Roderick," my Scotch friend called out, rolling her R's like drums.

The little man went over and took the wide woman and the wide baby into his arms. "Our-r-r little accident bair-r-rn," he said with an accent even broader than the woman's. "What are we going to call her-r-r, Maggie?"

"Katr-r-rine," Maggie answered.

A gleaming smile rippled along the man's brown whiskers. "Katr-r-rine. After-r-r my auld mither. What a wonder-r-rful idea, Maggie."

I turned my head away, my eyes filling with tears. Two happy people naming their bairn, even if it was an accident baby, while John—— But no, I mustn't let myself break down. I cradled my bundle tighter in my arms, and looked down at the tiny, toothless face that within a matter of minutes had become so infinitely dear. "I'm going to name my baby, too," I whispered down at him. "He's going to be John Andrew Taylor, after his dad."

After more conversation that sounded like the *Lady of the Lake* crossed with *Auld Licht Idylls,* I was introduced to Roderick's and Maggie's last name. It wasn't Dhu, as you might have suspected from the Roderick, but Knox. And within the space of five more minutes I was introduced to Mar-r-ry Mar-r-rgaret Knox, and Heather-r-r Angel Knox, and Ellen Douglas and Wendy Gr-r-raeme Knox, who all tiptoed in from the hall, where they had all been hovering since the entrance of their father. They were all ruddy-skinned, whole-

some-looking girls, who duplicated Roderick's and Maggie's features in ingenious and endless ways.

They didn't forget Johnny and me, either, in their touching adoration of their new little sister. "What a nice little baby you've got," they said, coming over after they had inspected Katrine. "Look how cute he yawns." "He and Katrine can play together while they're here in the hospital." Then in a kind of family chorus, they and their nice father added, "If there's anything at all we can do for you, with your husband gone and all, just let us know."

They were as good as their word. In the days that followed, they brought me stamps, mailed letters and showered me with Scotch oatmeal cookies.

After Mr. Knox and the ger-r-rls left, I spent the hours sleeping, ohing and ahing over Johnny, talking to Maggie, sleeping, weeping because my baby's father had to go off to war, sleeping. Then just as Johnny and I were sitting down together for lunch (his) for the first time, I got another telegram from Tod.

PROMOTER FOR MICHIGAN HISTORY RADIO SERIES JUST LANDED DETROIT, ALBION. CAN YOU HAVE BEGINNING SCRIPTS HERE IN THE OFFICE NOT LATER THAN NEXT TUESDAY SO THE BOYS AND GIRLS CAN CUT THE PLATTERS?

Just the thing to take my mind off John's going, I thought. But before I wire Tod I will, I must take the matter up with Maggie.

"And why should the r-r-rattle of a typewriter-r-r bother-r-r me?" Maggie said, with her wide smile.

"I'd be that pr-r-roud to have a r-r-real live writer-r-r in the same r-r-room with me. The only thing, you've got to let me r-r-read your stor-r-ries."

"Of course," I said, touched. "But I'm far from being a writer."

"If you're wr-r-riting stor-r-ries, you're a wr-r-riter-r-r, aren't you?" countered Maggie.

At that moment, Den and Belinda Monoghan walked in. Was I all right, poor thing? And it was terrible, simply terrible, my husband leaving me an hour after my baby was born, poor thing. What was I going to do now, poor thing? Stay on here, poor thing, or go home to my mother, poor thing?

The Monoghans, whom I had known only since John and I had moved into their apartment three weeks before, were as kind as the Knoxes. They came loaded down with candy and flowers. When I told them my mother was coming before I left the hospital, they were delighted. "We'll help you all we can, of course, but it's not good for you to be alone, poor thing."

When I asked them if they would mind sending a telegram and bringing my portable typewriter over to the hospital, their Irish faces lighted. "Anything we can do for you, just ask us, poor thing. We're so glad to do it." Then Belinda added the statement which never failed to touch my heart and at the same time make me feel like a Public Works Project. "We want to help you with everything we can, because we feel when we're helping you, we're helping out with the war effort."

Between the Monoghans and the Knoxes I got Detroit and Albion out to Tod Burke. I had books

stacked so high around my bed, I could scarcely see over them. While Maggie Knox told her endless streams of friends about her accident bairn, I pounded my typewriter, my mind momentarily forgetting the war. Patients would wheel by to investigate the pecking sound and catch a glimpse of The Author. What did it matter that NBC and CBS and *Cosmopolitan,* the *Post,* and the *Ladies' Home Journal* had been turning my stuff down by the ream for the last three years? In the Casper City Hospital I was William Shakespeare.

Then my mother arrived and almost upset the applecart.

Chapter Two

LIFE WITH MOTHER

My mother is one of the best women in the world. After my father died, she earned the living and brought up my sister and me, practically single-handed. As secretary to the Dean of Liberal Arts in Fostoria College, she became so well-known and liked by the students that even when she retired they came to visit her in droves. At night, she used to wash and sew and clean the house, and during the day she supervised us by using the telephone after we got home from school. She guarded us like a dragon from disease, and saw that we were fed and properly clothed, and when the time came, she helped us to help ourselves through college. It's no mean task to be both father and mother to a pair of lively girls, and my mother was both, with no falling down in either department.

She arrived a week after Johnny was born, and I was so glad to see her, I nearly wept on her shoulder. Johnny was the most perfect baby she had ever seen, the handsomest, the most beautifully formed. Then her face got stern. "But you're going to have to stop this fool writing at once."

"Why?" My face and my pride both fell so hard you could hear them crashing on the floor. "Everybody else around here thinks I'm Eugene O'Neill."

"Let 'em think so," she snapped. "Your baby comes first."

"Sure my baby comes first, but I can't see why my writing can't come second."

"You'll spoil your milk, agitating your brain thinking up radio plays. And all for a few cents."

I bridled at the few cents, mostly because it was so true. "You're way behind the times, mamma. The second day out the doctor gave me up as a cow and put Johnny on the bottle. So how can I affect his milk? It comes in cans."

"You can still transmit your nervousness to him," she sniffed.

"What nervousness?" I said crossly.

She made a bird-wing gesture in the direction of the Stonehenge of books littering my bed. "That," she said with a Sarah Bernhardt air, "would make anybody nervous."

"Not geniuses like me. I love it. Besides, look at your own life. What would have happened to all of us after dad died, if you hadn't had a profession to fall back on?"

We both gasped, chilled at the awful potentialities of the thing I unwittingly said. Then my mother put her arms around me. "You mustn't feel that way, honey. John's going to come home safe and sound. I just know he is."

But even with our mutual tears, my mother didn't give up the iron in her soul. "You finish those scripts because you promised them, honey. But after that, I'm going to see that you stop."

"It'll take more than you to stop me, my darling

mother," I said. But mother being mother, I said it to myself.

The day after mother came, the doctor let me take little walks down the hall. It was wonderful to be able to pass the doors of neighbouring rooms and see the faces of people who had only been voices up to now. And if I had ever thought the single room Maggie and I shared was crowded, I lost the idea when I saw the rooms crammed with four and five women in this hospital where life was frantically trying to outwit death in the surging birth rate of those hectic war years. Nurses, too, were woefully short, so that in my walks I would fetch drinks of water and fluff up pillows for women who were still bed-ridden.

One afternoon when mother was out, making one of her constant forays on the department stores, buying gifts for her new grandchild, and I was fetching a tray of drinks for some women in the hall, I looked up and saw Bootsy North.

"Honey," she cried, flinging her arms around my neck in an aura of Chanel No. 5.

"Bootsy," I cried, thinking about how when I first knew her she couldn't afford Chanel No. 5. "How wonderful to see you." She was wearing a navy blue suit that looked like something done by Schiaparelli and didn't leave out a single ripple of her figure. On her inky curls sat a chic little red hat like a cardinal bird about to take flight. "And how wonderful you look."

Bootsy hugged me hard. "I just couldn't *live* without coming over to see the cherub," she said, with her

usual dramatic overstatement. "And since Tod happened to be flying over on business between my broadcasts, I told him I had to come along."

I caught my breath at the magnificence of show business. A man has to see another man, so he flies instead of taking the train. And Bootsy was part of this glamorous world. "And Tod?" I asked tremulously. "Will I get to see him?"

"He'd rather die than leave town without having a look at you," said Bootsy, with even more extravagance in her speech than she had had when she was a simple student in our simple teacher's college. "He just raves about the work you've been doing."

Bootsy and I found a davenport at the far end of the hall, and continued our deluge of talk. "Have I had chances, but chances," she said, getting a Lauren Bacall roll to her Hedy Lamarr eyes. "Parts in stock, a couple of bit parts up in Chicago, nibbles from NBC. Before the war, they couldn't fluff you off fast enough, but now they chase you like mad. You ought to dig some of those radio serials out of your trunk and send them in."

"Trunks," I corrected. "Three de luxe numbers full of solid gold rejects. But if they're after you like mad, Bootsy, why hang around Springfield?"

"Tod," said Bootsy, Lauren Bacalling her eyes again, "Wait until you see him. He's really something."

And he really was. He came along the hall just then, hunting for Bootsy. Not tall, dark, and handsome, but tall, blonde, and radiant. A Siegfried that was a perfect foil for Bootsy's luscious, dark beauty. And

there was a brain behind that handsome façade, and a Puckish sense of humour.

"So it's a baby you had," he said, after Bootsy introduced us. "When all the time I've been crying over your gall stones."

I blushed as rosy as a tomato. "I—I hated to tell you for fear you'd take the writing away from me. It—it helped so much when John went overseas."

Instantly I knew I had said the wrong thing. That awful flush came into his cheeks that was to stain so many cheeks of men who had been rejected by the army, when mention was made of men who had gone overseas. He tried to pass it off. "You are to be congratulated, lady, on not having married a man with high blood pressure, or fallen arches, or water on the knee, or water on the brain."

I looked at the Viking body, so magnificent in the skilfully cut tweed suit and wondered what hidden thing lay festering there; for I felt that none of the things that Tod had so jestingly catalogued applied to him. And this festering thing—how might it affect Bootsy, who was so obviously in love with him?

But I forgot all this, as the talk shifted to radio, and I, who am writing-struck the way some people are stage-struck, listened fascinated. Tod explained how his "History of Your Town" series had branched out all over the United States. From Maine to California —why we've even got Canada after us. Eventually we'll do the history of every city and hamlet in North America. Then we can start all over again with a new series."

I gasped at the tremendousness of it. Even if I

was earning only five dollars a script. Then Tod fell to praising my plays, and I forgot all about money.

Suddenly instead of being two o'clock in the afternoon, it was five. Tod jumped up and took Bootsy's arm. "Come on, *ingénue,* we've got to be flying home."

"Okay," said Bootsy. "But not without seeing the baby."

"I love to show off my baby," I said.

I led the way proudly down to the little glass houses where the babies lived. Row after row, in wash baskets on wheels, they slept, howled, yawned, blinked, and waved tiny arms with the pink and blue bead bracelets that denoted their sex and spelled out their last names.

I halted my little party before the second basket from the left. "There he is," I exulted. The kitten blue eyes were open and the sky-blue bracelet waved along with the tiny hands. "The spitting image of John, isn't he."

Bootsy nodded. "A block off the old chip. Even though I can't read that bracelet from here, I'd know at once whose child he is."

"Wouldn't you," I affirmed. "That's one thing that's so interesting about babies. They look so familiar the first time you see them."

Bootsy kept on studying the small red face. "He's got your eyes, though. And your way of smiling."

"But look at those hands," I added. "They're John's to the life."

"He's got your mouth, though," put in Tod. "And your hair."

"Exactly," chimed in Bootsy. "Dark, long and curly."

Suddenly one of the nurses nudged my arm. "Would you like me to wheel in your baby, Mrs. Taylor, so your friends can see him?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, thunderstruck. "That's Johnny, isn't it?"

She shook her head. "That's Bobby Burney. Johnny is in the next room getting a bath."

That cured me. Never again did I say Johnny looked like his father, his mother, his grandmother, or his Aunt Edith, or his Uncle Jack. From then on when people asked me whom I thought he looked like, I would reply, "Just like himself. And sometimes not even like that."

When Tod left he gave me the history of a couple of new towns in Michigan to do. So that much to mother's disgust, I continued to peck away at my typewriter and have the Monaghans and the Knoxes bring new books from the library. For mother treated me the way one would treat someone hopelessly addicted to the drink habit.

Somehow the next two weeks trotted along. Mornings, chats with Maggie, check-ups from my doctor, getting acquainted with a new nurse every day, script-writing. Afternoons, floods of Maggie's friends, which she generously shared with me, and dribbles of my own friends. For the army people were most kind. In spite of the fact that John and I had been stationed in Casper City for less than six months, relatives couldn't have been more solicitous. They brought me flowers, candy, cake, magazines, and even a borrowed radio.

Officers I had never seen before strolled in, "just to see how John's frau's coming. Got to report to John, you know."

Tears would well in my eyes at their mention of John, because it was in that direction I was having most of my troubles. Having arrived in San Francisco, John waited for days with the hospital staff for a ship. At least three times a day, he wrote frantic air mail letters and telegrams, asking how Johnny and I were coming along. I wrote and wired at least five times a day, telling him Johnny and I were both fine. But none of my messages got through. At last, in desperation, I appealed to John's colonel at the fort, who wired a colonel in San Francisco, who finally located John just as his ship was about to embark. At least, the colonel was able to set John's mind at rest about his wife and son before he sailed. And the San Francisco colonel wrote me a long letter saying he had seen John.

The letter put me into a somewhat more cheerful mood, but I was never free of the gnawing worry that John would be killed. I tried to be gay, I plunged myself deeper than ever into script writing, and I lost myself in Johnny. But the worry was always there.

And there was another worry, though a smaller one. The other women who had come to the hospital at the same time as I were leaving, and I was staying. First Mrs. Burney, then Mrs. Price, and now Maggie. I said good-bye to Maggie with tears in my eyes. But the doctor said my blood was not coagulating properly and I would have to stay on until he found something to thicken it up.

"See," triumphed mother. "I told you that writing wasn't good for you."

"Don't tell me if I stopped writing it would thicken my blood," I snapped. "Besides, if that were true and I did stop writing for good my blood would get thicker and thicker until it wouldn't run through my veins any more. Nope, I'd rather stick at my scripts and take a chance on thin blood."

"You haven't changed a bit," sniffed mother. "You are still the dumbest arguer I know."

It was hard, but I kept my own counsel as to who was the dumb arguer.

The day after Maggie left, I got a new room-mate, one of those limp, ether-drenched forms Maggie and I had been when we first came into the room. The form turned out to be a nice woman with pleasant brown eyes and a shy, sweet smile. But she wasn't Maggie, and I wanted to go home.

After five days of taking every kind of pill under the sun, my blood thickened at last, and I was ready to leave. And I, who visioned myself going home in obscurity with Johnny and mother and a taxi-driver, found myself at the head of a cortège. The Monoghans came, and Mr. Knox and all his daughters minus Katrine came, and John's sergeant and a couple of his privates came, and John's colonel and his wife. I felt like Queen Elizabeth besieged by courtiers. And which one was I going to ride home with and still hurt no feelings? A question of protocol.

At last (army style, which I deplore), the sergeant and the privates solved the problem by fading away. Then the colonel piled the rest of us in his station

wagon and drove us home for what he called a baby warming.

I don't recommend a baby warming your first day home from the hospital. Mother had straightened out the apartment, but John's liquor supply was badly shot, and there were no hors-d'œuvre, no sandwich supplies, nothing that would serve as the basis of a party. Furthermore, I felt too limp to move off the davenport. But mother took charge of Johnny, the Monoghans took care of beer, pretzels, and highballs, which they brought up from downstairs, and the colonel's wife took charge of a huge pot of coffee (also brought up by the Monoghans) in my pint-sized kitchen. The colonel introduced the Roman banquet system, new style. He would drink three or four highballs and become very gay, and then drink three or four cups of coffee and sober up. After doing this four or five times during the course of the afternoon, to the utter confusion of his stomach, he and his wife went home and the party broke up. The highballs were definitely in the ascendency when the colonel left.

Except for the gnawing worry about John, the days passed pleasantly enough. There were long walks in the park with Johnny, there was the delight of bathing his soft, round body every morning and of fondling him while he greedily drank milk from his bottle. The eight and a half pounds he had weighed at birth was steadily increasing, and the kitten blue eyes were open for longer and longer periods of time. One wonderful day he smiled at me.

"Wind," said mother, who was still with me in spite of her threats to go home.

I don't care if it is, I thought. If wind can produce such a beatific smile, why don't we have more of it in this world?

Mornings, while Johnny slept and mother shopped for groceries, I turned out scripts. Mother is the type who goes from store to store, hunting for bargains. Whereas I used to average ten minutes a day at the neighbouring grocery, mother would walk for blocks and hours, comparing prices and examining vegetables. Often she would come home well on in the afternoon, exhausted.

"I found the most wonderful watermelon at the National Coffee Store," she would say, kicking off her shoes.

"But I never buy watermelon out of season," I would reply. "It's too expensive."

"Oh, but you'll love this watermelon," mother would say, wriggling her tired toes. "It was only a dollar and a half a melon, while it was two dollars a melon everywhere else."

"But it's still more than I should pay for dessert, mother."

"Nonsense, dear. You should give yourself a treat once in a while. And look at these lovely soap chips I got at the A & W."

"But I don't use soap chips, mother. I use detergents."

"But at ten cents a box, honey, you'd better use soap chips."

"What else did you have to buy with it?" I would ask, suspiciously.

"Only a bottle of floor wax."

"But I don't need floor wax, Mother. I've already got two bottles out in the kitchen."

"You can always use floor wax."

"How much was it, Mother?"

"A dollar and a half. But look what you're saving on the soap chips."

Ever hear of a squirrel cage? That's mother when she's explaining her bargains. Mother has retired now, after a long and busy life, and shopping is her hobby and everybody should have a hobby, so you never feel like getting too harsh with her.

"Okay, Mother," I would always conclude. "Thanks so much for getting the groceries."

"Don't thank me, honey. I love to do it." And even though I knew it would take her five hours to rest up, I felt sure she did.

One of mother's purchases was a baby buggy. The tag that came with it described it as a "shiny, black iron and chrome land-cruiser with a collapsible, water-resistant plastic top and sides, superior to leather."

"The big, lined, padded body keeps your baby snug and warm as a bug in a rug in all kinds of weather," mother added to the tag, quoting the clerk. "And only twenty-nine ninety-eight, marked down from forty-nine ninety-eight."

"It's fine, Mother. I can carry Johnny and packages too, and we can all go to the park some day and carry Johnny and a picnic lunch in it."

"And after Johnny grows up you can always use it for delivering laundry."

"I hadn't planned taking in laundry as part of my

future. But when I do, I'll let Johnny deliver it in his coaster wagon."

"You know what I mean, dear. I don't mean delivering laundry, I mean delivering laundry to the laundry."

"And what's wrong with the laundry trucks?"

"Nothing right now. But if this war gets worse, we'll have to get more and more self-sufficient. And a baby buggy could come in mighty handy. Even for hauling coal, maybe."

As things turned out, mother was something of a Cassandra, foretelling the petrol shortage. But at the time I shuddered to think what Johnny would look like after I had hauled a load of coal in his buggy.

Do you remember those early days of World War II when they had scrap drives? People cast beautiful pots, pans, vacuum-cleaners, floor lamps, brass bowls, candlesticks, washing machines, and stoves out on to the front lawn to wait for the scrap trucks, while in the stores hardware and metal gadgets of all kinds got scarcer and scarcer, and higher and higher priced.

One day I stood and positively drooled over a little portable electric washing machine. "With diaper service gone the way of all good things during a war, this would save mother and me hours of washing Johnny's clothes by hand. And there's hardly enough scrap-iron in it to make a bullet to kill a mouse."

Right beside the washing machine stood an object that didn't have enough scrap-iron in it to kill a mosquito. It was one of those sturdy, comfortable, old-fashioned wicker buggies that undoubtedly had shel-

tered plenty of babies, but could still harbour plenty more. "What a shame," I thought. "Even the wheels are made of wood. But I forced myself to turn away.

But the scrap trucks were dilatory in that part of town, and for several days I kept returning to gaze at the little washing machine, and its friend, the wicker buggy.

It was on one of those forays that Johnny's "shiny, black iron and chrome land-cruiser with the collapsible water-resistant, plastic top and sides, superior to leather" broke down on the street. One side of an axle parted from the other side of an axle, wheels rolled, and plastic tore and Johnny screamed. I picked him up in my arms and soothed him. Then I looked at the land-cruiser. There was absolutely no way of making it navigable out here on the street. And we were at least seven blocks from home, and I had been shopping and the land-cruiser was crammed with bundles.

The wicker buggy, I thought, my eyes straying over to where it rested under an elm tree, not ten feet away. I'm going in and ask whoever owns it if I may borrow it to get home.

I went to the door and rapped. But nobody answered. And nobody answered at the neighbour's door on the right, or the neighbour's door on the left. Probably a very patriotic neighbourhood and everybody's down rolling bandages at the Red Cross, I told myself. Anyhow, Madame X is going to loan me that buggy for a few hours, whether she knows it or not.

I piled offspring, pillows, blankets, and bundles into the wicker buggy and started off. Even with the

squeaks which an oil-can could easily eliminate, it pushed more easily than the land-cruiser ever had. Workmen really had the time and materials to make things right in those good old days, I thought.

On the way home, I stopped at the store where mother had bought the land cruiser. When the manager appeared, and I had somewhat angrily explained my plight, his sad-spaniel eyes grew sadder. "Hmm. Hmm. Sure is too bad." He looked and sounded exactly like a big, fat bumble-bee. "Hmm. Hmm. I'll pile you and the baby and this buggy into my truck and we'll all go out and have a look."

Back we rode to the front lawn where I had exchanged buggies. When he saw the stricken land-cruiser, the manager went into another bumble-bee meditation. "Hmm, Hmm. I hate to tell you this, but that buggy is shot. They're all shot before you even get them from the factory, these days. Hmm, Hmm. Nothing's any good any more. Hmm, Hmm. Tell you what. I'll give you your money back and you keep the buggy you have. Hmm, Hmm. Now there's a buggy. Stood up for thirty, maybe forty years, and it'll stand up for thirty, maybe forty more."

"But it isn't mine," I wailed. "I found it here on this lawn and practically stole it to come down and see you."

"Hmm, Hmm. That's easy. Go on in and ask the lady if you can't buy it from her."

"But she isn't home," I mourned.

"Hmm, Hmm," he droned. Then a little gleam came into his sad eyes. "Tell you what. I'll give you back your money, and you exchange buggies right

out here on the lawn. That way you'll have a buggy that'll run and she'll have a lot more scrap for the scrap drive."

I wrung his hand. "Mister, you're wonderful. With your brains you should be running the government, instead of the Top Value Department Store."

"Hmm. Hmm. Got enough trouble this way." But the sad-spaniel eyes took on a nice little shine, as he drove off.

The wicker buggy proved to be such a jewel that I couldn't get the washing machine out of my mind. What have I got, I kept asking myself, that I could exchange with my unknown benefactress for that little white beauty? I conferred with mother and we went ransacking through the apartment. Pots and pans? No indeed. I needed every precious one I had. The vacuum cleaner I had bought second-hand ten years ago and was now so obsolete I could no longer get parts for its coughing insides? Where was I going to get another to take its place?

At last I went down and consulted the Monoghans. As usual, Denny Monoghan proved to be a king-size Galahad. "Sure an' if it's scrap-iron you want, you've come to the roight place. I ain't a plumber for nothing. Come, girl. I'll give you enough old poipe to make up for ten washing machines."

He even wanted to haul it over to Madame X's front lawn for me in his truck. But knowing how busy he was with half his assistants off to war, I shook my head. "You've got a twenty-four carat gold nugget for a heart, but I wouldn't think of endangering the Casper City plumbing by taking up your time like that. I'll

put an old rug in Johnny's wicker buggy, and you pile in the pipe, and I'll take it over there myself."

People gave me strange looks as I walked along the street, with a baby buggy piled high with pipe. "Hard-looking baby," "Girl must be so poor she has to peddle scrap-iron." "Why doesn't she give it to the government?" you could almost hear them saying to one another. But I passed them by with stars in my eyes. In about twenty minutes I was going to be the proud possessor of a beautiful washing machine.

At last I reached Madame X's front lawn. Oh, no, it couldn't be. But it was. The cruel scrap truck had come and taken all the beautiful scrap. My beloved little white washing machine was on its way to the melting pot.

I am quite a big girl by now, but I stood there and cried. Then, five minutes later, still too shaken to go in and tell Madame X about the buggy deal, I dragged back home with Denny's scrap.

Denny met me at the door. "Too bad you didn't get the washing machine, girl. But long's it didn't get you anywhere, I'm roight glad you brought back my poipe. The stuff's gettin' scarcer all the toime, and I moight be able to salvage it myself."

For the first time I took a look at Denny's donations. Most of the pieces were brand new. I couldn't help it. I threw my arms up around Den's leathery old neck. "You old fraud. That wasn't scrap. That was perfectly good pipe you gave me. Oh, Denny, Denny, I'd rather have a friend like you than a washing machine any day."

Denny blushed and nodded his balding grey head.

"Sure, an' it would have been noice if you could have had us both." Then his blue eyes twinkled. "But, girl, ye'll find I can do some things a washing machine can't." And with that he took me in his arms and gave me a sound Irish kiss.

Chapter Three

INTRODUCTION TO "WHIZ"

It is strange to think that now I know every move John made during World War II as well as I know the fairy tales I read to Johnny, but while John was making those moves, I had absolutely no idea where he was. True, I knew he had departed from the West Coast, so that ruled out Europe. But leaving under sealed orders, he had been told to prepare for either a hot or a cold climate, so that could have been Alaska or the Far East. Alaska you could pin down a little, but the Far East was limitless.

Was it Guadalcanal? Or Australia, or New Guinea, or China, or the Phillippines? Or somewhere in the Marshalls, the Gilberts, or the Solomon Islands?

The first word I had from John after he arrived in that Never-Never land which had swallowed him up, was a telegram sent from Ambudu Birthday, wherever that was. "Arrived. Well. Love," it said. It may not sound much, but during a war those can be the three most important words in a woman's life.

Arrived. No torpedoes, no fatal bombing from the air, no ship in flames, no floating for days under a merciless sun on a cobweb life raft. *Well.* No Bataan Death March, no freezing to death on some Arctic mission, no shrapnel wounds, no elephantiasis, no malaria, no starvation, no jungle rot. *Love.* No for-

getting, no desertion, no succumbing to local sirens black, brown, white, or yellow. What could be more wonderful than, "Arrived. Well. Love"?

At last letters began to come. Those letters we all got during a war with the infantile-looking scissor work, the missing pages, the bars and bars of inked-out passages. "At last we arrived in ———. The harbor is a wonderful sight when there's a full moon gleaming over the ———. It is very ——— here, but I am getting used to it. For the present, we are living in sight of a monastery, perched high on a hill. I love you, darling."

Wonderful, you sigh happily. At last, he's arrived in Blank. It shouldn't be any trick at all to figure out where Blank is because there's a harbour there, and a hill and a monastery. So you get out all the atlases you can find and open up all the encyclopædias.

My, but there are lots of harbours in the world. And even more hills and monasteries. As for the combination of the three, nobody is very specific. But anyway, he still loves you. At least, the censors didn't cut that out.

Then a letter arrives in which Eagle Eyes lapses a moment or two. "Got three days' leave, so took a little trip to ———. (Blankety, blank, our old friend Blank again.) The harbor here is the most beautiful I have ever seen. (The same harbor as the other Blank, or is this a new harbor by a new Blank?) The ——— here is wonderful. (Scenery? Peaches? Pears? Eskimos? Let's all have fun and guess.) Maybe you and I can visit Sydney together some day. (And who in the name of Ambudu Birthday is Sydney,

and why should John want us to visit him together?) And then it comes over you. Sydney is the name of a town, not a man. At last you know where John is.

So the great guessing game goes on, during a war, in almost every home in the land. And it is a desperate guessing game. Those loved ones, who have been as close as your own breathing—it seems as though you must know where they are, must follow them on a map or in imagination, or you can't live.

The precious, mutilated letters you carry with you everywhere. So that when you are out wheeling Johnny in the buggy and you meet Jane, or Sylvia, or Elly, you can read them your letters and listen to theirs. With a little lift of your head, of course, because John can really write letters, if the censor gives him half a chance. But mostly you carry those precious letters so that you can touch them and feel as though you are touching your beloved's hand.

Then there are those awful days, endless, stretching like deserts, when you hear nothing and your own letters are returned. Am I about to receive the terrible yellow telegram? you ask yourself in agony. But surely by this time, the next-of-kin would have been notified. Maybe he's a prisoner somewhere, starved, beaten. Or maybe this very moment he's lying wounded somewhere, fighting for his life. Maybe he's dying in some foxhole. And so it goes on until the blessed letters start again, and you kiss them, scissor work and all.

In the meantime, of course, I was loving my baby and turning out scripts. Maybe I wasn't Norman Corwin, or Mary Margaret McBride, or Sandra Michael, but the five-dollar bills were snowballing pleasantly.

Furthermore, what a thrill it was to tune in on various radio stations around in Michigan, even though the wave lengths often made them no more than a whisper, and hear my own masterpieces floating out over the air. My own words clothed in flesh and blood voices. Voices that seemed, as Tod had written me, to enjoy reading my little dramas, grave and gay. As I would listen, yes and mother, too, even though she did it surreptitiously from some other room, I would think, "Did I really write that scene with that delicious humor? Did those beautiful passages in that tragic climax really come out of my head?" Even though two months later I could hardly bear to look at the script, for shame.

Then came catastrophe. One morning while Johnny was napping, and mother was shopping, and I was deep in the history of pioneer Michigan, I got the telegram. No, not one of those awful "We regret to inform you's." But something bad, nevertheless. It read:

> ALL MY GOLD MEN GOING OFF TO WAR, LEAVING JUST ME AND A FEW OTHER DREGS. HAVE TO GIVE UP THE "KNOW YOUR TOWN" SERIES. SO NO MORE SCRIPTS. DESOLATELY, TOD.

Just as desolately, I slumped down on the sofa, the tears welling. Then I made myself straighten up. "Shame on you," I said to myself, "when there are really big catastrophes in the world right now. And what about Tod? You're just losing a little two-bit writing job, but he's losing a business. And being left

behind by everyone else when he'd give his eye teeth to be in the war."

Somehow the worst of it was telling mother because I knew she'd gloat so. And she did. "That's wonderful, Marion. It was so silly to risk your health over five dollars."

"But I wasn't risking my health. I never felt better."

Determined sniff. "This way you can give your full time to your child."

"How can I give my full time to my child? He sleeps three-fourths of the day."

"But now you can give up this apartment and come back to Iowa with me to live."

"Oh, no, Mother. I'm comfortable here. I don't want to move again."

But as the days wore along, she gradually won me over. "I can't stay here for ever, Marion, and it's going to be mighty lonely when I leave." "Sure, you've got the Monoghans and a lot of nice friends here, but it isn't the same as your own flesh and blood." "I've got property to manage, and your Aunt Edith to look after, and I've got to get back as soon as possible." "What do you want to stay on here for? Back in your home town you'll have Edith and me to help you look after Johnny, and you'll feel natural and comfortable."

"All right," I finally said. "I'll give the Monoghans a month's notice on the apartment, and go back with you the first of August."

Once I had spoken I felt wretched. Move again, I who hated so to move? Rip up the roots I had put down in Casper City, and go back to a home town I had been absent from so long, I would seem like a ghost

in it? Go? Stay? Go? Stay? Even though I had given my word, the imps of indecision still tore at me so brutally, I put off saying anything to the Monoghans from day to day.

Then one morning while mother was out hunting bargains in the grocery stores, there was a thumping knock on the door. When I opened the door, I was confronted with a junior edition of Old King Cole, complete with a beer-barrel body and a full-moon face. The face was fringed with snow-touched black hair that gave way at the top to a shining, glaciated pink dome. Cole was unaccompanied by his bowl and his fiddlers three, but he most assuredly had his pipe.

"Mrs. Marion Taylor? Good morning," said Junior Edition Cole. He removed his pipe from the convenient little nook the stem had worn in his teeth, but he was still framed in an aura of blue smoke that smelled like burning autumn leaves.

I blinked. Was I so well known in Casper City that strangers addressed me by my first name?

"Surprised you, huh?" Cole chuckled and fished in the pockets of his white Palm Beach suit for a card. "Wilbur Slemmons," the card read. "Production Manager, Radio Station WHIZ, 850 on Your Radio Dial. Let WHIZ put WHIZ into your Biz."

I blinked again, this time so hard I sprained my eyelids. "Come in, Mr. Slemmons." A real live radio man come to visit me! My voice was as awed as if I were in the presence of royalty.

Wilbur Slemmons shifted back and forth from his toes to his heels like a rocking-horse. "Heard your Casper City series on the radio. Decided to look you

up." His terse, telegraphic speech contrasted strangely with his easy-going manner.

I blushed like a seven-year-old, praised for playing *Chop-Sticks* at his first recital. "Oh, thank you, Mr. Slemmons."

He came on in and rolled his barrel body down on my sofa. "Don't thank me. Up here on business. Always scratching around for new writers. Like to have you come on up to the studio and see what you could do for us."

"I'd love to."

"Next Thursday afternoon at two, okay?"

I nodded delightedly. "Of course."

There was a little pause, during which Mr. Slemmons pulled his pipe out of his pocket and fondled it in his pudgy hands. "Like to see your baby. Always did like babies."

"But how did you know I had a baby?" I said, startled.

He sucked his unlighted pipe. "Tod Burke. Stopped by at the office back from the hospital time he saw you. Said your baby was a honey. So sure would like to see him."

"But he's asleep, Mr. Slemmons."

"I'll tiptoe. Won't wake him."

"Come on, then. I love to show him off."

Wilbur Slemmons, Production Manager of Radio Station WHIZ, 850 on your radio dial, truly did like babies. He didn't oh-h-h-isn't-he-cute and ah-h-h-isn't he-a-doll, as he stood at the side of the crib, looking down at the little pink peony bud that was Johnny in his sleep. But his grey eyes grew very soft, and his

mouth took on a beatific smile. "Sure is a nice little guy. Reminds me of my Jimmy. Grown up now and off to war. But always be a baby to me. Well, 'bye now. See you Thursday." And with that, he and his pipe were gone.

When I told mother about Mr. Slemmons' visit, she not only protested, she yelled. "I suppose you'll take any little old thing they give you, even if it's sweeping out floors, just to get inside a studio."

"Of course, Mother. I sweep floors at home, don't I?"

"You're impossible, simply impossible. First thing I know, you won't be moving home with me."

"Now, Mother, don't borrow trouble—if it is trouble."

The following Thursday, I put on the only good dress that would still fit me after having Johnny and started for the studio. I had no idea how a radio writer should look when he goes out to be interviewed for a job, but one thing was certain. I was definitely long-hair, since I had not had my shingle-bob trimmed for over three months.

The reception-room of Radio Station WHIZ was furnished with the same kind of battered leather davenports, chairs, and magazine tables you can find in any dentist's, doctor's, or lawyer's office in any town in the land. But to my enchanted eyes, the room seemed to be floored with gold, upholstered in silver, and set with diamonds. A fairy princess who sat behind a glittering desk, asked me my business and led me down the hall to Mr. Slemmons.

It was a warm afternoon, and Wilbur wore the same

Palm Beach he had had on the morning he visited me. He was polishing his glaciated dome with his handkerchief, as I entered the cubby-hole that served as his office.

"Afternoon, Mrs. Taylor. Sure is a hot one. Have a chair. Here. Read this script."

Bowled over again by his abrupt speech, I sat down and began to read from the paper he handed me. "If your sight isn't right, see Bright, Casper City's finest optician. See Bright and see right."

"Put a little more zip into those lines, Mrs. Taylor. Remember we're trying to sell something, Mrs. Taylor."

I chased a family of frogs out of my throat. "If you're tired of throwing brickbats, why not try bouquets? Parker's Posy Shop always has a large assortment of fresh, beautiful flowers. And how about that young lady you're courting? Remember. If you're out to spark her, see Parker. The best in corsages, cut flowers, potted plants, and funeral wreaths. If you need a bouquet, see Parker Today." And don't get the funeral wreaths mixed up with the corsages, I added mentally.

Wilbur's eyes got a little gleam in them. "Not bad, not bad. Try this."

My hands still unsteady, I took the second sheet of paper he handed me. "Once upon a time there was a wee little bear who lived on the side of a great big mountain. One morning this wee little bear started out to climb the great big mountain with his great big mamma. And the great big mamma said to the wee little bear, 'We're going up the side of that great big mountain to pick raspberries.'" Well, well. So I was

grooming for bedtime stories. But I didn't care. That was how Bootsy had started, wasn't it?

I had just gotten the wee little bear lost on the side of the great big mountain with his great big mamma, when Wilbur waved his well-upholstered hand. "Fine. Fine. Now try this."

I took the new sheet with a new burst of confidence. "Have you ever wondered why you have dandruff? Well, gather up close to your radio, and I'll tell you. Each one of the hairs in your head is like a tiny plant, with a stalk above ground and roots in the soil. Now, now, don't go off mad. Not real soil, of course. Because *your* hair doesn't *have* to be dirty to have dandruff. Your hair can be as clean as shampoos can make it and still have dandruff. And you're wondering, why? Why should I have more snow on my collar than Santa Claus? That's just what I'm here to tell you about. Those hairs in your head, that are in reality small plants, have their roots in your scalp. Your scalp feeds them and waters them, yes, with oils. So if your scalp gets dry and stiff, like uncultivated soil, what can the poor little old plants do but wither and die and fall out and leave parched earth behind them? For the parched earth is the dandruff, you know. That's why you *must* take care of your scalp if you're going to have shining hair and uncontaminated coat collars. That's why——"

"Fine. Fine. Really rolled along on that one," interrupted Wilbur. "You've got a selling voice."

I flushed with pleasure. He thought I was so good, he had actually uttered a sentence in which a subject was tacked on to the predicate. "Do you think you can find a place for me?"

"Going to make a recording of your voice to be sure. But so far's I'm concerned, you're in."

Sure enough, the next day I was. I never got to hear the record in which I gave my all to the lowdown on infected hair follicles, but Stanley Blaire, the owner of the station, heard it and liked it; and Frankie Blaire, broadcaster and brother of the owner of the station, heard it and liked it; and Bill Deal, business manager of the station, heard it and liked it. So they offered me a couple of programmes. Enough to pay the rent and have a few groceries left over.

"But how about my writing?" I asked Wilbur. "You haven't tried me out on that at all."

"Don't have to. Heard what you can do on the Casper City series."

We were sitting in Wilbur's molecular office in which the glassy eyes of a hyper-thyroid stag glared across at the pop eyes of a mounted muskellunge.

"One other thing." Nervously, I began to tie boy scout knots in my handkerchief. "My mother doesn't at all like the prospect of my staying on in Casper City, instead of going back home with her. Would there be any permanence to this job?"

Wilbur waved an opulent hand like an Oriental potentate. "Don't worry about that. Give you work as long as you want it."

"Fine." Then I went back to my boy scout knots. "But the baby. When mother goes, I—I'll maybe have trouble getting sitters. He—He sleeps just fine in his buggy. Would you have any objection to my bringing him up here, while I broadcast?"

Again the majestic wave of the opulent hand.

"Course not. Told you I liked babies, didn't I? Wheel him around myself."

And the way things turned out, that's just what Wilbur had to do.

Bill Deal, the business manager, was a tall, swarthy man, whose black eyes seemed to flame with Fourth of July sparklers, with bags underneath to catch the sparks. He vacillated between enormous spurts of energy and equally enormous spurts of lassitude, the one seeming to bring on the other. But even in lassitude, his eyes still sparkled.

The first day I met him, he was in a fit of energy, in which talk gushed forth like an oil well. "I'm sure glad you're going to be with us. Let's cut out the Mr. and Mrs. stuff, shall we, Marion? I'm Bill, even with my wife around. I've got a couple of good prospects I'd like to have you go out with me to see right now, if you've got a minute to spare. One's a jewelry store that ought to fall for you like a ton of brick."

"It would be wonderful if they would. Let's go, Bill."

"Atta girl. I like to see people up and coming. Wait'll I get my fedora."

Walking up the street with Bill Deal when he was in one of his energy cycles was like trying to keep up with an ambulance rushing a dying man to the hospital. My legs are long, and I have a considerable supply of vigour myself, but Bill left me somewhere down along the ten-yard line. When at last I caught up with him at the Jewel Casket, he was talking like a ticker tape to a little dried-apple of a man with melancholy green eyes.

"But I tell you, Jenkins, this girl is an absolute honey. She's got hair, she's got eyes——"

H. Worthington Jenkins, owner and operator of the Jewel Casket, had the same kind of expression on his face that a gorged congressman might have at a banquet, being offered his third duck. "So why don't you put her on television? So what good does that do me on the radio? Na-a-a-a, Bill, I'm all right the way I am, advertising in the *Casper City Sentinel.*"

Bill Deal looked as though somebody had just thrown a pie at him along with the pie tin. I didn't know it then, but I was to find out soon after, that the Casper City newspaper and the Casper City radio station were like the Hatfields and the Coys, with words for bullets.

Bill recovered his poise, but only to take aim at the *Sentinel.* "Tell you what, Jenkins. I'll give you two weeks of spot announcements on the air, absolutely free, and if the results don't beat anything you've ever had from the *Sentinel,* I'll come right into this store and eat one full issue of the *Sentinel* right before your eyes, although I'd much rather munch on strychnine. Now, how's about it?"

Jenkins sniffed as though he were smelling an ancient egg. "Whad'ye mean, spot announcements?"

"Here's what I mean by spots." Bill took the pose of Washington Crossing the Delaware. "Do you want that girl you're having trouble landing to be yours for life? Then take her down to Jenkins' Jewel Casket and let her pick out the ring. For a bracelet or ring, or any old thing, see Jenkins' Jewels today."

Jenkins sniffed again, this time as though he were smelling two ancient eggs. "Na-a-a-a, not just any

old thing, Bill. We got good stuff in here. I think I'll stick with the *Sentinel.*"

The sound of Bill Deal swallowing bitter brew echoed throughout the Jewel Casket. "Look, Jenkins, maybe my impromptu stuff did sound a little corney, but I'll fix you up some spots that'll make 'em positively flock in here to buy your diamonds. Honest to Pete, I will. See here, Jenkins, I'm not asking you to give up the *Sentinel.* I'm pleading with you to keep on with the *Sentinel* and try us at the same time and see if we don't outsell the *Sentinel* three to one. Please, please, don't give up the *Sentinel,* Jenkins. Otherwise how can WHIZ leave the *Sentinel* far behind in the dust?"

A phone rang at the back of the store and Jenkins started to leave. "Sorry, Bill."

Bill nodded in the direction of the pretty blonde dusting watches at the left-hand counter. "Let little Esmeralda answer that phone. How does it look for you to be answering your own phone, Jenkins? As though you've got no clerks, huh?"

Jenkins paused in his hasty flight like a pheasant shot in mid-air. "Maybe you're right, Bill. Only her name isn't Esmeralda. It's Molly."

"Sure, sure, I know it's Molly. Now about these spot announcements. If I give 'em to you absolutely free, and you get to look over and approve each and every one, what can you lose, Jenkins? Tell me one thing. Did the *Sentinel* ever give you a break like that?"

Jenkins kept glancing over at Molly at the telephone, like a retriever fenced away from the object he is dying to retrieve. "Nope, I guess not."

Then as he heard Molly breathing into the mouthpiece, "Yes, Mamma, I'll be sure and bring home the bread, Mamma. Sure, Mamma, you don't have to worry about a thing, Mamma. The bread is as good as on the table, Mamma," Jenkins breathed a little easier. "Okay, Bill, I'll take you up on those whadyecall'ems. If I can see every one beforehand, and make any changes I want to, and I don't have to pay a cent for them. We got high-class stuff in here and I want to keep it that way."

Bill described a circle with his thumb and index finger. "We *will* keep it that way. We'll make it so high-class you won't know yourself."

Jenkins rolled his eyes. "Well, we don't want it too high class, you know."

"We won't get it too high class or too low class, Jenkins. We'll get it ju-u-ust right."

At last Bill and Jenkins got around to me. "Now here's a little lady that's going to put Casper City on the map, so far's radio's concerned, Jenkins. Did you listen to her 'Know Your Town' series last month? Good enough for the 'Cavalcade of America,' huh, Jenkins?"

The melancholy look deepened in Jenkins' eyes. "Never could stand the 'Cavalcade of America', Bill. That's one programme I always tune out."

"O-h-h-h-h." Bill went down for the count, but only for a minute. "But this girl can do anything. You want a snappy little discussion of gems, you want a script on the history of watches? She can deliver the goods."

The sniffing-an-ancient-egg look came back into

Jenkins' weazened face. "Whad'de I want a script on the history of watches for, Bill. We got only up-to-date stuff in here."

"I know, I know, Jenkins. I said, just in case you do."

"Besides, what does she know about gems, Bill? It takes years to know about gems."

"Sure, Jenkins, sure. But she can read about 'em in the library and encyclopædias, can't she?"

"Na-a-a, that's no good, Bill. It takes years——"

Bill gave a deep sigh. "Sure, sure, maybe it does. But she can always go to an expert like you for stuff on gems, can't she, and then write it up herself?"

That almost did it. In spite of himself, a pleased smile came into Jenkins' face. "Ya-a-a, maybe she could." Then he lapsed into gloom again. "Na-a-a, Bill. It'd be dull as ditch-water. Casper City wouldn't go for a program on gems."

"Maybe it would and maybe it wouldn't." Bill passed around cigarettes and lit one for himself, a trifle shakily, I thought. "Especially if you threw in that old guff about birthday stones and their meanings."

"Whad'ye mean, guff?" Jenkins knotted up like a bantam rooster.

"Slip of the tongue, Jenkins. I meant stuff, not guff. Sorry."

For the first time since we entered the store, Jenkins' green-stone eyes took on a little life. "Tell you what, Bill. I could go for a singing programme. Something about spring and a wedding ring. Always did

like singing. Now if this girl has got a voice, I might be interested."

Bill Deal rolled his eyes up toward heaven. "Look, Jenkins, she can write like Shakespeare; she's got a speaking voice that'll pack your store with customers; she can cook; she can sew; she can sweep out a mean floor; but no, she can't sing. I ask you, Jenkins. Can Garbo sing? Can Fred Allen sing? Can Norman Corwin sing? Then you got the nerve to ask me, can Taylor sing?"

Jenkins took out a rumpled handkerchief and blew a Gabriel's trumpet blast through his nose. "You don't need to get so het up, Bill. I just ast you, that's all. Always did like singing, even opera. My idea of a swell program is Dinah Shore or Frankie Sinatra."

"Look, Jenkins, the day we get Shore or Sinatra in personal appearances over WHIZ, you'll be the first one to be notified. In the meantime, how about this little lady in a nice little talking program, streamlined just for you and your products?"

"Na-a-a. Some day when you get hold of a singer, come around. But no blah-blah talking."

"Okay, Jenkins. The next time Lily Pons comes around to Casper City, hunting for work, I'll send her over. In the meantime, I'll bring over a few spot announcements for your approval."

"Okay, Bill, if they're absolutely free. And then I might not take 'em, understand?"

Out on the pavement, Bill Deal swabbed his brow. It was a hot afternoon, but not that hot.

"It looks as though programs are a little harder to sell than groceries," I ventured.

By now, Bill was swabbing the inside of his collar. "You said it. But Jenkins has always been a garbage can. He wouldn't buy a yacht if you offered it to him for a dollar ninety-eight. But keep your chin up, and let's get on up the street. We're going to visit the Warm Companion Furnace Company."

The sun was blazing down on the pavement like Samson smiting the Philistines. "You mean people are going to buy furnaces this kind of weather?"

"Look, honey chile, you got nice eyes, but you're a little dim around the brain. In advertising you're always a few jumps ahead of the seasons. First you've got to line up the account, then you got to write up the stuff, then they approve it, and *then* you put it on the air. Any one of those steps might take a couple of months, or break down completely, see? Besides, when it's ninety in the shade, that's the time for you to get your furnace checked over and repaired. If you wait until October, it's too late."

As it turned out, Bill Deal was absolutely right. Two blocks down the street, Karl Van Oosterhout, the local dealer for the Warm Companion Furnace Company, was all set to put on a programme at once, urging everybody who had a furnace to get it checked NOW. "People drive me nuts, calling up the first cold day, yelling for a man to come right over, they're freezing. We only got three men, so can they cover the whole town at once?" Karl scowled and chewed a slit on the end of his cigar.

Bill's eyes got full of Fourth of July sparklers again. "Truer words were never said, Karl. So we get

Marion here to write us up a little program and mix in here and there, 'Don't delay. Get your furnace checked today. If you wait until fall, we may be too busy to do it at all.'"

Karl's face beamed beneath its perspiration. "I'll go you one better, Bill. I'll give 'em a checkup, absolutely free, if they call in for it before the first of September."

Bill wrung Karl's corpulent hand. "You're a man after my own heart, Karl. Ten to one they'll give you their repair work."

"Sure, Bill, that's the idea. Now what I want you two to do is to work out a program for the next six weeks, describing all the things that can go wrong with a furnace. So simple even a nine-year-old could understand it. That ought to bring 'em in. Think you can do it?"

"Sure, sure," said Bill.

I breathed a little sigh of relief. The only thing I knew about furnaces was that they were something kept in the basement. But at least Karl wasn't asking me to sing. "I'll certainly be glad to try, Mr. Van Oosterhout."

"Swell." Karl eased his bulky body back in his creaking swivel chair. "Then when fall comes, I'd like to have you describe step by step, exactly how to tend to a furnace. Coal, of course."

Then and there I pulled the first, but not the last, boner of my radio career. "But I've never kept a furnace," I wailed.

Karl looked at me as though I were the off spring of a cretin mated with a congenital idiot. "Never kept

a furnace? Where'd you live before you got here? The tropics?"

"J-just in apartments," I bleated.

At this point, good old Bill rode to the rescue. "Look, Karl, I've been keeping furnaces since I was five years old. Warm Companions, too. I can tell the little lady everything she needs to know."

Karl's face resumed its rising sun smile. "Sure, sure, nothing to keeping a furnace. Here are the directions that come with every Warm Companion. And here are a couple of pamphlets on firing and furnace repairing. Take 'em along with you and see what you can do in the way of scripts. And be back here Saturday morning."

I went away with a fistful of material on the care and feeding of Warm Companions. Back in my apartment, mother sputtered so hard you could hear her two blocks away. "Now I've heard everything. You doing a furnace program. When I brought you up to be a lady and sent you to college. Are you going to start shovelling ashes, too?"

I paid no attention to mother's invectives and went on in to look at my little sleeping beauty of a baby. Then I sat down to do my scripts. If you think it's easy to describe all the things that can go wrong with a furnace and how to fire one and still keep the material absorbingly interesting, you just try it. But by Friday evening, I had something down on paper, and I took it over to Bill.

I thought he looked a little wilted when he saw me, but I laid down my animadversions on the joys of fuelling and repairing a Warm Companion before him with

something of a swagger. "I burned up plenty of midnight oil and brain juice on this, Bill, but I don't think it turned out too bad. Anyway, a nine-year-old could understand it."

Bill took the sheets out of my hands with the speed of an injured tortoise. He flipped a few pages. "Yeah, yeah. Not bad. In fact, you did a good job."

"Fine. What time do you want me to meet you in the morning to go over to Karl's?"

Bill's face took on the expression of a man who has just lost his mother, his wife, his children and ten thousand dollars. "Marion, you're a nice girl and I love you dearly. That's why I didn't have the nerve, I guess, to call you up and hand it to you straight. But Karl Van Oosterhout dropped around at the office this afternoon. He said he had changed his mind. He wants me to dig up a man to broadcast furnaces."

Chapter Four

DEN AND BELINDA

OVER the week-end, Bill Deal recovered from his gloom, and by Monday he was ready to sell me to Du Pont, Macy's, and General Mills, if such a thing had been possible in Casper City.

"Come on, Marion. Let's get out on the main drag and see what we can dig up. You can't ever say die in this business or you really are sunk," he said, when I showed up at WHIZ.

Out on Michigan Avenue, which is not only Main Street for Casper City, but half the other towns in Michigan, we stopped at Peabody's Department Store. Mr. Julius Peabody said he might be interested in a programme in which we forecast women's fashions, but he didn't think so. We could try, though. No harm in his looking over a script if we wanted to take a chance and run one off for him. And now if we'd please excuse him, he had a lot of business to attend to.

Across the street, Emerson's Bakery might take on a programme in which Marion Taylor gave recipes and household hints, but then again, no. If Emerson's Bakery gave housewives cake and cookie recipes three times a week, they'd quit buying Emerson's cakes and cookies, wouldn't they?

"We won't give 'em cake and cookie recipes,"

countered Bill. "We'll give 'em ice cream and pudding recipes to go with Emerson's cakes and cookies."

"We-e-e-l-l, maybe you got a point there, Bill. Tell you what you do. Bring around a script and I'll see."

The next stop was more promising, even if it was a rambling old house in the residential instead of the business district. Jim Greene of the Band Box Beauty Shop was definitely interested in a programme. He had a buddy who ran the High Style Beauty Shop over in Emmons, Michigan, who had been using radio for the last six months and had had wonderful results. So Jim was willing to take a chance.

"Just set up a nice little shop in here, and I want the public to know it," Jim continued. And it was a nice little shop. Clean and neat and nice-smelling and as chintzy and frilly-looking as a Valentine. Big glass counter full of cosmetics that smelled good enough to eat. Three young and pretty operators in smooth, white uniforms that crackled with starch. Too smooth and too crackling. There weren't any customers to muss them up.

Bill got so expansive, he passed around cigarettes. "What kind of program did you have in mind, Jim?" he asked, blowing a perfect doughnut of a smoke ring.

Jim Greene smiled the friendly, lop-sided smile I was to know and like so much in the months to come. "What do you two have to suggest?" Then he turned his nice blue eyes toward me. "You're a woman. What kind of beauty program would you like to hear if you were home, sitting in front of a radio?"

I gave him as straight an answer as I could. "One that wouldn't try to sell me bunk. One that would tell

me what to do about my dull hair and my blotched skin and my cracked nails and my summer make-up. And I wouldn't want it to stop there, either. I'd like it to go on and tell me about wearing straight line clothes if I'm plump and more frilly clothes if I'm too thin. The top to toe program that would take up my appearance problems from my hair down to my feet. And I wouldn't want it to stop for a couple of months, either."

Jim's eyes kindled. "The Top to Toe Program. That's a wonderful title, right there. You write it just the way you describe it, and I'll buy it."

Three days later, I sat down before the microphone at WHIZ to begin the Top to Toe programme. Bill and Jim and Wilbur had edited and pruned my script and edited and pruned my voice until I knew the words backwards. But facing that shining little spheroid that was to carry my voice to every mansion and hovel in Casper City, I began to have shaking palsy, ague, and malaria. I mopped up a large-sized swamp on my forehead and tried to control the rattle of my paper and teeth. Wilbur, seated across the table from me, began to mop a swamp off his brow, too, and he made frantic motions indicating that I was to keep my chin up. Then Jerry Parks in the control room gave me the signal that I was on the air.

I gave a gulp and opened my mouth. But what came out was not English. It was a kind of squeaky Sanskrit. I swallowed cavernously and began again, not daring to look at the pain and suffering I knew must be furrowing Wilbur's round face. This time English emerged, but in a voice I had never heard before. Furthermore, the

words I was uttering were as foreign to me as though Clifton Fadiman or President Roosevelt had written them. And they made no sense, those words. They were pebbles endlessly flung into a pool that endlessly swallowed them up.

At last the eternity that was fifteen minutes of Taylor on the Top to Toe programme came to an end. Jerry Parks, in the control room, cut me out and cut in the late Tom Brenneman and his *Breakfast at Sardi's*.

"Fine, kid, fine," said Wilbur, now that we could talk off the record in the broadcasting room.

"Oh, no, Wilbur. It was horrible. I'm going home and fling myself into an ash can and never pull myself out again."

"Nix on the ash can, kid. First few minutes were a little crappy, but from there on out like a veteran. Come on into my office."

I followed Wilbur's broad back down the hall and seated myself beneath Wilbur's hyper-thyroid stag. He opened the drawer of his battered oak desk and waved a bottle. "Here. Have a shot. Should have given you this before you went on the air, but never too late. And quit worrying about your next program. By that time you'll be such an old hand you'll be bored instead of frightened."

"Oh, Wilbur, how lovely it would be to be bored."

Wilbur's statement was a trifle exaggerated, but fundamentally true. The programmes went easier and easier as the days went by until I felt no more agitation talking into the microphone than I did talking to the butcher—and not much more excitement.

And I got another programme. Mr. Marshall of

the Marshall Home Furnishings heard my voice and liked it and gave me a programme on antique furniture. "I'm not a bit afraid it won't help me sell my new stuff. If people know what genuine Chippendale or Hepplewhite looks like and what's more, is worth, it'll help me sell my traditional lines, won't it? Sure, I've got a lot of modern furniture sitting around here in my store. But we can go into that later. Let's take things up in chronological order."

Mr. Frank Marshall was big and booming and full of exuberance. He had grey hair mixed with his heavy thatch of black, but he looked and acted as though he could still make All-American quarter-back any time he wanted to go back to college. He picked up two heavy books from off his mahogany desk at the back of his big furniture store. "Here are two volumes that might help you. You can find a lot more stuff in the library. Come back some time tomorrow with a sample script."

The Casper City librarians all jacked up their eyebrows when I walked back in through their sacred portals. But when they saw I wasn't likely to drop another baby in their library, they clustered around me like old friends. "How's your son? We heard about how your husband had to go off to war an hour after he was born. My, my, too bad."

My eyes glistened for a moment with tears. "Yes, it was too bad."

Then Miss March, the grey-haired head librarian, got an impish smile on her wizened wood-chuck face. But don't get me wrong. It was a *nice* wizened wood-chuck face. "We all wanted to come down in a body

to see you in the hospital. We sort of felt as though we had a personal interest in that baby, you know. But we didn't know how you would take it."

I was touched. "I would have loved it."

"Well, wheel him around soon so we can all have a look at him."

At last we got around to antiques, and they helped me find so much material I didn't quite know what to do with it all. "History of Michigan or antiques? You name it, we've got it," chirruped Miss March. "We pride ourselves on our research material here in Casper City."

"You certainly can," I said delighted. Then once more I sat down at a table surrounded by books to write a script.

The next day when I showed my finished product to Wilbur, Bill, and Frank Marshall, they all liked it. "We'll use it just as it is," Frank said, in his deep, rah-yeah-football voice. "And we'll go on the air with it next Monday, that is, if Bill can dig up some time."

"I can dig up some time," said Bill.

And so was born the "Down the Ages with Furniture" programme. Not a very tricky title, I'll admit. But it was to be a solid, substantial programme, as Frank put it, and he didn't want any "show-off monickers."

I began with the Greek and described, among other things, the acanthus leaf, explaining how many modern craftsmen had copied it in their furniture decoration and carving, and how you could recognise it. Then I skimmed rapidly through the old Roman and the Italian and went on to the French—Louis Quinze,

Provincial, etc. I became perfectly fascinated by my study of old furniture and hoped I could inspire my radio audience to like it too. Frank began to get some fan mail. But he also began to get some un-fan mail, too—cards asking, "Why waste your time on that old-fashioned trash? We'd like to hear something about the modern stuff," and, "When are you going to quit that medieval rambling?"

I was afraid the un-fan mail might dissuade Frank from his programme, but I needn't have worried. "I like it," he said in his booming voice. "So I figure somebody else will, too. Besides, the people who like radio programs seldom write in. It's usually only the gripers who do."

In the meantime, of course, I continued to turn out programmes for Jim Greene. "Sure are getting the customers," he said enthusiastically one day a month later, when I stopped by for more grist for the mill of Top to Toe. "I know it's got to be you because I've hardly had a line in the *Sentinel*."

"Thanks, Jim." Nice little quivers of satisfaction were descending from my own top down to my own toes. "But it's really Bill Deal you ought to tell that to. The *Sentinel* is his No Man's Land. Although personally I can't see why radio and newspapers can't bolster each other instead of taking pot shots at each other. Something like movies getting people to read books they dramatise, and vice versa."

"I think you're right," Jim said, with his lop-sided smile. "Only I guess you'll never sell that idea to Bill."

. . . . .

as I gathered up my child where he lay sleeping on their bed. "Sure ye kin make it upstairs?" queried Denny.

"Sure," I said, trying to ignore the way the stairs kept twinning as I climbed upwards.

He took my arm. "Here, girl. Ye need hoistin' and yer offspring with ye." And with that he carried us both upstairs and left us at our front door.

I got Johnny into his crib and myself into my bed. Then I sank into a deep sleep in which there were no dreams of mother, in fact, no dreams at all.

I awoke in the morning to headache, but at least not to heartache. Johnny was wailing for his bottle; yesterday's dishes were still unwashed in the kitchen sink; and debris from mother's packing flooded the apartment like a beachcomber's convention. If I was going to bring any kind of order out of my domestic chaos, and still be down at the radio station for a ten-thirty broadcast, I didn't have time for heartache.

I didn't have time for headache, either, so resolving never, never to tipple again, not even with my good friends, the Monoghans, I quaffed two Bromo-Seltzers and three aspirins. Pain left my head, to be superseded by a kind of giddy, free-wheeling light-headedness, in which thought processes were non-extant.

Nevertheless, I got Johnny fed and bathed and the litter picked up. Then I bundled my offspring into the faithful wicker buggy and started for the radio station.

"Bring Johnny down with you any time you've got nobody else to leave him with," Wilbur had often said to me. "Got to get on the air on time, you know. Time's everything in radio." But with mother around, I had never taken Wilbur up on his offer.

This morning I would have to, however. So I wheeled the shabby buggy past the prospective clients, the bill collectors, the stage-struck aspirants that haunted the outer office and sought out Wilbur.

I thought he looked a trifle pale around the gills when he saw me, but he rose nobly out of his chair to the rescue. "Sure. Sure. No trouble at all. Little codger asleep like that."

I didn't have the heart to tell him the little codger was in the habit of waking up around ten-thirty, and the Sleeping Beauty trance was about over. "You're wonderful, Wilbur," I said, hurrying on into the broadcasting room before he changed his mind.

I got the signal from the control-room and plunged into my programme. As you probably know, a broadcasting room is sealed against noise so that no distractions from the outside can enter and get into the microphone. Therefore, I was a little startled when I happened to glance up through the window that looked out on to the hall and saw Wilbur pacing back and forth with Johnny. Their faces were both the colour of scarlet tanagers. Johnny was going through all the motions of crying and Wilbur was going through all the motions of singing. Probably "Bye, Baby, Bye-O, Why Do You Cry So?" or "Bye, Baby Bunting." I couldn't tell because there was absolutely no sound. It was like one of those old-time silent movies entitled "Mother's Night Out" or "Papa Paces the Floor".

As I prattled on to my radio audience about skin, nails, and hair, my heart wrenched, but at the same time I giggled and almost spoiled my programme. The bewildered expression was increasing in Wilbur's

mince-pie face. I saw him signal violently and hold Johnny up to the window, in pantomime, trying no doubt to reassure my baby with the sight of me.

Johnny was not reassured, however. He kept on wailing in pantomime, while dismay spread over Wilbur's face. Then Bill Deal drew up and Wilbur handed Johnny over to him like a hot potato. Bill tossed Johnny in his lank arms. No cessation of pantomime wails. Bill tried Wilbur's stunt of holding Johnny up to the window so he could see me. No cessation of pantomime wails. Then Wilbur brought Bill a chair, and Bill sat down and dandled Johnny on his knee. No cessation of wails. Even from where I sat I could see the globules of perspiration gathering on Bill's brow. And all the sparkles had fled from his eyes, leaving only the bags beneath, bleak and dark as abandoned potato sacks.

Then along came Eloise, the pretty little girl who always sat in the front office and answered the phone. Eloise held out her arms, and with the look of a man who has been rescued from a life raft that has been twenty days on a stormy sea, Bill put Johnny into them. The crimson in Johnny's face turned to tea-rose pink and he turned his eyes toward Eloise and gave her a bewitching, toothless smile.

When at last my programme was over, Bill came in and grabbed me by the arm. "Only four and a half months old, but already that kid of yours is a hopeless lady-killer. Look at him. Yowled his head off when Wilbur and I diddled him, and cooes his head off for Eloise. What's she got that we haven't got?"

"It's all my fault, Bill. I should have had a girl-baby,

who would fall madly in love with you and Wilbur at first sight, instead of a runner-up for Jack Dempsey's muscles and Lawrence Tibbetts' lungs." Then I began to wail myself. "But what am I going to do with mother gone and no baby sitters to be had in this town where even the high-school kids can work in the food factories in their spare time at a dollar an hour?"

"You're going to continue to bring Butch down here any time you want to," said Bill. "Eloise can hold him while Wilbur and I answer the phone for her. And then when Butch gets used to Wilbur and me, we'll have a big time playing with him. Won't we, Wilbur?"

You could hear the sound of Wilbur swallowing way out in the hall. "Sure, sure." He was doing his best to keep the tremble out of his voice. "Wait'll he's big enough for horsey-back. I'm the best damn' horsey-backer in the whole United States."

"And the best damn' friend in need, too," I said, tears of gratitude surging into my eyes. "Both of you. And you, too, Eloise."

"He sure is cute," said Eloise. "Reminds me of my brothers when they were little. All ten of them."

Bill went into a double-jointed bow. "Maybe that's what's wrong with us, Wilbur. We never took care of ten children. You only had three and I only had five."

By that time, Johnny was so deeply in love with Eloise he yowled when I took him over. As I plumped him back into the wicker buggy and tucked in his blankets, Bill and Wilbur said, "You'll have to bring him back with you tomorrow. You can't take care

of him alone any more now that he's come to know the fair Eloise."

When I got home Belinda Monoghan met me at the door. "I don't know why I didn't think of it before, poor thing, but you know how Denny and I love babies. Why don't you leave Johnny with me when you go down to the radio station after this? That way you won't have to bundle him up to go down with you and maybe make yourself late." Then she went into her old, so-well-intentioned refrain. "Besides, it'll make Denny and me feel so good because we know whenever we're helping you, we're helping with the war effort."

"Belinda, you're an angel. I'll take you up on that except when Bridge Club meets in the afternoon."

Belinda and Denny Monoghan were the kind of people who should have had twenty-four children to mother and father. Instead, they had two goldfish. They were sixty-one and fifty-eight respectively, and they had been married for forty-one years, but they still sparred about their childless state when they got irritated at each other.

"It isn't my fault, Denny, and you know it," Belinda would sputter, her colour rising. "Lookit my sister. Married ten years and had twelve children, and another coming on, maybe twins again. You can't beat that for a record. And my mother had fifteen children. No siree. You can't say the O'Rourkes can't have children, if you give 'em half a chance."

Poor Den would look so wistful, angry and contrite all at once, it would break your heart. Then his good old County Cork blood would win out, and his

blue eyes would spark. "Blast ye, Belinda, it's not the fault of the Monoghans, either. Look at me father, rest his soul. Nineteen children, and all alive to this day, and all producin', except me. The Monoghans always paid off with kids like slot machines. Put somethin' in, somethin' comes out, as me father used to say. No siree. All the Monoghans but me have been scattering enough Monoghans around the auld country and the Americas to raise an army and attack the United Kingdom. Cripe's sakes, Belinda. You can't say it's the fault of the Monoghans."

This dissertation on the fecundity of the individual O'Rourkes and the individual Monoghans and their sterility when united would go on for hours. Then at last Den would shout, "Blast ye, Belinda, just to prove it ain't been my fault, I'll go out an' try it out on someone else, and see what I kin produce," and Belinda would blubber, "You just do it, Denny Monoghan, and I—I'll——" Then she would dissolve into tears.

Den would come over, after that, and take her apple-dumpling form into his arms. "There, there, girl, ye know I didn't mean it. We've had a good life, you an' me, so what the divvil?"

Then Belinda would wail, "Oh, Den, if only Bobby had lived, or Annie hadn't come and taken Baby Sally away from us." I had heard those two stories over and over. About how Den and Belinda had adopted baby Bobby and he had died of scarlet fever. About little Sally, whose mother had abandoned her to run off with another man and whose bewildered father had brought her over to Belinda to take care of because he had to work and he didn't know what else to do with

her. But the erring Annie had had a change of heart and come back to her deserted husband and child a year later, and they were all living happily together now with three more children right in the next block. Belinda knew this denouement was right, and in her rational mind, she rejoiced in it. But in the year she had kept baby Sally, she had fallen so deeply in love with her that the wrench in her heart had been almost unbearable when Annie had come back to claim her child.

"Sure, an' we should a gone right out an' adopted another child, the same's you get another pup when your other dog dies," Den would always explain. "But Belinda, she wouldn't have it. Said she couldn't stand to have her heart tore in ribbons three times. Two was enough, an' maybe she was roight."

Actually, Denny and Belinda didn't need to adopt any more children because they had already adopted the whole neighbourhood. Little boys and girls in droves would stop for Belinda's sugar cookies and brownies and popcorn balls and peppermint drops. They'd wait for hours for Den to come back from repairing a leaky pipe or backed-up sewer, so they could consult him about a broken doll or an injured scooter. And I have known Denny to tell a bank president he couldn't come down to fix up his flooding sink for an hour or so while he soldered a tricycle for a small neighbour.

For all that, Denny was the best plumber in town. Ever since he had gotten the contract for the plumbing in the First National Bank Building, five years before, everybody said so. And he was so proud of that

building. "Best damn' toilets in town," he would always say whenever he would drive me by in his car.

So it was that I came into possession of two baby sitters instead of one practically every time I went down to the radio station. For when I would arrive home, I would usually find the master plumber playing with Johnny along with Belinda, and sometimes just the master plumber. "Sure an' I told Belinda to go on with her shoppin'. It's fun to have a little kid all to yerself."

One day when I left Johnny with the Monoghans, I arrived to find the apartment rocking with the gay dance music that always followed my Top to Toe programme. "Got the best little old wrinkle yet," Den said, his blue eyes twinkling. "Sure an' the moment your program comes on the air, I tune ye in good an' loud, and Johnny never knows ye are gone."

Chapter Five

SARAH'S PARTIES

KIND as the Monoghans were, I did not want to impose on them. So I made it a rule never to leave Johnny with them more than the times I was actually broadcasting, or ran into definite emergencies. Once more I renewed my efforts to find a baby sitter so that I could go out evenings once in a while. But the search was futile. "Nome," my prospects would all reply. "When I'm gettin' a dollar an hour at the food factories, steady work any time I want it, why should I baby sit at seven-five cents an hour, which ain't even steady? It don't make sense."

Nome, it didn't. So I took to wheeling Johnny in his buggy whenever I went down to see my sponsors, Jim Greene and Frank Marshall. "Sure is cute," Jim said the first time we entered the Band Box together. He picked Johnny up and gave him a can of talcum to play with. "A little young and the wrong sex for the Band Box, but just the same I'm going to give him his first haircut when the time comes."

All of a sudden I began getting an idea. "Why is he the wrong sex, Jim? You've plenty of room in this big, old rambling house. Why don't you put in a children's hair-cutting section in one of the extra rooms and play up the idea that while Mamma is getting herself prettied up, Sonny Boy and Sister Sue can be

getting their curls trimmed at the same time? You've got such a way with kids you could keep them spell-bound when you shear them. And if you fixed up a toy corner to keep them happy afterwards until their Mammas got their finger waves, I'll bet you could get all kinds of customers. It would be cheaper to come in here and get your hair done than hire a baby-sitter."

Jim's eyes lighted up. "Say, that's a barn-burner of an idea. But I wouldn't run in the operators to watch the kids. I'll run in my wife. She's got extra time with Mary Lou in school. Kathy's no good on hair, but she's wonderful with kids."

In the end, Jim installed the Kiddies' Korner, complete with hobby horses and stuffed toys and games, and a little merry-go-round which Kathy picked up somewhere second-hand. I plugged the Korner on my radio programme, and before you could say Top to Toe, Jim was opening two more rooms of his house to the public because the Band Box was getting such an overflow of children. "If things keep up like this, Kathy and I are going to have to buy the house next door," Jim grinned.

Things boomed so, Jim hired three new operators to take care of the influx of mothers and installed the girls and their equipment in two bedrooms upstairs. And he opened up three more rooms to the children. Furthermore, he began featuring children's cosmetics —whatever he could get in those war-plagued days— Little Lady beauty kits, Little Men combs, and so on. I began to take the same personal pride in the Kiddie Korner the doting mother does of a child who wins all the baby prizes at a county fair.

Then came the day when I wheeled Johnny down to the Band Box and found Jim Greene looking like Macbeth just after he had seen the ghost of Banquo. The Band Box rocked with the laughter, shouts, fighting, throwing toys, pinching, hitting, yelling, crying and shrieking of shoals of children, and Kathy Greene looked as though she had been put through a meat chopper. There were only a few adults there getting their hair done, and most of them looked either disgusted or angry.

"Don't you mention Kiddies' Korner once more over the radio, or I'm going to drown you," Jim shouted above the din. "The Pied Piper, that's what I am. Without the pipe."

But he looked more like the Sorcerer's Apprentice, who having stolen his absent master's magic formula to make the broom sweep and the water wash, couldn't make them stop. "What's the matter, Jim?" I said.

Jim managed his old lop-sided grin, but it was pretty weak. "I might be able to stand it if we were making money on the deal, but we're losing it, hand over fist. The first few weeks were fine. Mothers came in here in droves to get their hair done, while we watched their children. Then business began to fall off, and I noticed the same mothers were coming back with ten or twelve kids, different ones each time. Sure, the mother would get a permanent, or a shampoo and a finger wave, but the kids bulged out the house. Then one of the kids let the cat out of the bag. The mothers were taking turns coming down here with all the neighbourhood brats, while the other mothers got the morning or the afternoon off. The Band Box Baby Sitting

Establishment, that's what we are. And beauty has gone on the rocks because not even my good old customers can stand the noise. The only ones I get now are the mothers that bring the kids."

What to do? Try to hire somebody to come over and take the kids to their house so they wouldn't disturb the Band Box customers? Whom could you hire even if you could find a house that would hold them all?

Jim did the only thing he could. He finally had to limit his beauty customers to two children apiece. But his old fine careless rapture in the project was gone. "I feel like old Scrooge," he confided to me, "telling them they have to leave some of their children at home. If they've got quadruplets or quintuplets, how're they going to pick and choose?"

I sighed and said I didn't know. Gradually his old customers came back and some new ones with them. But I never mentioned the Kiddie's Korner again over WHIZ.

Life was much simpler in regard to my dealings with Frank Marshall. When I explained that mother had left and I would have to bring Johnny down with me to see him or give up the programme, he boomed, "Fine. Fine. Just bring the little tike in here any time you want to."

The little tike was gurgling and cooing like a mourning dove for Frank, and Frank waggled a big finger at him. Suddenly Frank got a gleam in his eyes. "Say, I just got an idea."

Having just seen what ideas had done to Jim Greene, I groaned. Inwardly, you understand. "What is it, Frank?"

"We ought to be working up to Christmas sales pretty soon, now, and I intend to put in a stock of toys. Why don't we stop playing up antiques for a while and plug toys and baby furniture and introduce the whole thing by having Johnny gurgle and coo just as we go on the air?"

I hated to dash Frank's enthusiasm, it was such a fine, buoyant thing to see, but I just had to. "Look, Frank. With your son a senior in high school you've forgotten that babies don't do things on schedule. The day I would take Johnny down to the radio station to gurgle and coo, he would probably be yelling his head off."

"That's all right. Then we could go on about these are the toys that children cry for."

"Huh ugh, Frank. Castoria beat you to that slogan by about fifty years. Besides, Johnny might go on crying and drown out the whole program, or decide not to cry at all. If you want laughing and crying baby sound effects, we've got them up at the station on phonograph records."

In the end, I persuaded Frank to introduce his toy plugging with a "Mamma" and "Papa" sound effect uttered by one of the baby dolls Frank got as a selling item in his store. It turned out to be quite effective, and on the strength of it, Frank had quite a run on baby dolls.

But the doll got to be quite a little problem. I couldn't leave her down at the radio station for fear she might be mislaid. So I took to carrying her back and forth. Tiring at last at the lifted eyebrows along the street at the sight of a grown woman who had taken

to playing with dolls, I began carrying my little bisque friend in a suitcase. When at last the Christmas plugging was over and I returned the doll to Frank, he gave it back to me. "I haven't forgotten as much about babies as you think. Although my son wouldn't be caught dead looking at a doll now (toy, you understand), for the first three years of his life he played with one constantly. So take it home to Johnny."

Johnny had cried for the doll long before, and now that it was his for keeps, they were inseparable. When Johnny began to talk, he would say, "Baby Dow," reverently. But his caveman traits were already in the ascendency. After hugging and kissing Baby Dow with all the sticky passion he was capable of, he would bang her head on the radiator, pull at her legs, punch her eyes, and then hurl her across the room by the hair. This alternate adoration and banging went on until Baby Dow lost her jaunty clothes, her eyes, her hair and her teeth. At last her stuffed body was reduced to a few dirty bats of cotton and her head was smashed. When I had to relegate Baby Dow's mangled carcase to the furnace, Johnny crawled around the house crying, "Baby Dow, Baby Dow," in such a piteous, lost-lamb voice, I had Frank order another one. But by then Baby Dows were impossible to get, and I had to bring home a teddy bear. But Johnny refused to look at the teddy and kept wailing for Baby Dow, hunting for her constantly. This went on for weeks.

When I was in despair, Johnny solved the problem in his own baby way. He fell asleep on the floor near his toy box. When he awoke, he was wailing, as usual, for Baby Dow, but his eyes happened to light

go overseas. For most army men this was a sacred time, when they shunned intruders and stayed close to their families, as though they were trying to store up for a whole war all the familiar gestures, the features and the voices of their wives and children. But not Phil and Sarah. They loved each other as much as two people could, but they gave parties. Four cocktail parties in two days, for which they hired a country house. John and I arrived on a Saturday afternoon, quaffed cocktails, munched tidbits until far into the night. We awoke to find ourselves sleeping on one of the davenports with other rumpled guests snoring all around us. Finally Sarah came out with chasers and breakfast. So we ate. And then because more guests began arriving for a second party, we stayed on. This went on for two days, until the colonel rescued Phil from what threatened to be his sixth party and put him on the train.

After Phil left, Sarah went into a deep depression. But she finally crawled out of it by giving parties, just as she and Phil had done in the past. About that time food rationing was rearing its ugly head, but that didn't deter Sarah. She had her dinner party guests bring their own sugar, their own coffee, and finally their own meat. I am sure that, if she had lived through the sieges of Troy, Tyre, Jerusalem, or Paris, Sarah would have gone right on giving parties, even if she had to entertain in a cellar and serve up grassroots and water.

And Sarah didn't confine herself just to entertaining women, after Phil left. She continued to invite the men and their wives she and Phil had known together.

That kept her alternating, as she put it, between hen and rooster and straight hen parties.

One week Sarah broke her record. She had a party every night, including Sunday. I got invited to three of them. "Be sure and bring Johnny because these are going to be good old hen-parties with everybody bringing their kids and stacking them on my bed," she told me over the phone.

I carefully marked up the dates on my kitchen calendar, and set out for the first party with Johnny, as usual in his buggy. The event turned out to be one of Sarah's usual feminine get-togethers, with the children sleeping, yowling, kicking and cooing in the bathroom, kitchen, and front hall, and the women knitting, playing bridge or rummy in the living-room, and everybody talking at once.

The following night was ditto.

The third night I started out for Sarah's next party, my eyes a bit bleary from lack of sleep, for Sarah's get-togethers always nibbled away at the early morning hours.

When Johnny and I arrived in Sarah's front hall, there was no leaving him in his wicker buggy. He was as wide awake as if it were dawn. So I picked him up along with his diapers, my coffee and sugar rations and rapped on Sarah's door.

When Sarah opened it, I was a bit surprised at the blank look that came over her round face. Beyond her somewhat bulky form I caught glimpses of the colonel, some half-dozen majors and a few captains. Their wives were with them, but I neither saw nor heard any children.

"You—you got the wrong night. You weren't supposed to come until tomorrow night," Sarah blurted out. "Don't you remember?"

"Oh, gee, I'm sorry." I continued to stand in the doorway with my child on my arm, as bewildered and confused as Liza on the frozen river with the bloodhounds baying at her from both banks. "Well—I guess I'd better be going." I shut the door and started to put Johnny back into his buggy.

All of a sudden I glanced up and saw the colonel and his wife coming toward me. "Look, honey," the colonel said, "you've got your own coffee and sugar and we've got a piece of meat big enough for three. Why don't you stay and have dinner, so I can play with Johnny? I haven't had a good look at him since the day I brought him home from the hospital."

"B-But Sarah," I quavered. "She wasn't expecting me."

Sarah settled that problem by coming out of her door and taking me by the arm. "Of course you'll stay. I should have had the brains to ask you in the first place, but you surprised me so. You know me. I can always make room for one more. Besides, after dinner we're going to need an extra hand at bridge, because one of the men had to show up without his wife. So don't you dare go home, even if you did make a mistake and come to the wrong party."

I settled myself on Sarah's davenport with the colonel and Johnny on one side and his wife on the other. All at once there was a rap on Sarah's door. Sarah opened it and there stood Elsie May, another army widow, with her two children in her arms.

Sarah was too dismayed to manage speech this time. She just stood and held on to the door lintel.

"Is—is something wrong?" asked Elsie May, when she saw Sarah's flushed face. Then she peered inside and began to gather up the situation. "I—I—oh jiminy, did I get the wrong night? I—I'm sorry."

By this time Sarah began to come out of her ether. "No, you didn't get the wrong night. I—I guess I'm the one that got the wrong night. Come on in."

Elsie May was finally persuaded to stay, although I knew she felt uncomfortable about it. And almost before she had settled Dickie and Susie on blankets in the bathtub and herself back in the living-room, there came another rap at the door. When Rose and her infant stood in the doorway, a shout of laughter went up.

"I've got an extra dozen eggs at home," called the colonel. "I'll go home and get them so we can feed Rose."

"No, I—I'll borrow some down the hall," said Sarah, who was much calmer than she was on my onslaught, but who still got as red as a spring radish each time a new rap came on the door. "I—I'm glad you've all come. The more the merrier."

Even more arrived to be merry with before the evening was over, for Hilda came with her three children, and Jane came with her two, and Ellen came with her five. We had roast pork, roast beef, chops, eggs, wieners and baked beans, most of which was supplied by pinch-hitting neighbours.

"What an awful thing to do," Sarah whispered in a bathroom aside, when I went in there to change Johnny's diapers.

"It wasn't awful at all," I replied. "We're all having fun. But when you get rich and start entertaining royalty, you'd better hire yourself a social secretary."

After dinner, when the children more or less quieted down, we played bridge.

After it was all over, Keith Bainbridge, the man who had showed up without his wife, asked Johnny and me to ride home with him.

"Thanks, Keith. But Johnny's big buggy won't fit in anywhere in your car. I know because I've tried it out in our Oldsmobile. I'd better walk."

"Hooey," said Keith. "I never saw the buggy yet I couldn't fit in somewhere." He had a cocky smile on his impudent, rat-terrier-crossed-with-bulldog-face. He had long moved in our circle along with his pretty, pouty, sloe-eyed wife, Meta. Tonight he was alone, undoubtedly, because he and Meta had had another of their famous quarrels.

Keith shoved and pushed, when he got Johnny and me and the buggy down to the street beside his car. But because he didn't have a station wagon, a bus or a Mack truck, the king-size, non-collapsible wicker buggy resisted all his manly efforts.

"See what I mean, Keith?"

"Blast it all, Marion. How come you have a buggy that dates back to the Flood, anyway? Is John spending so much money on some brown girl in the tropics, you can't afford better?"

I felt like clouting his insolent, George Raft mouth, but I held myself in. "Don't you ever mention such a thing again, or I'll—I'll——"

"You'll what?"

"Give you a piece of my mind and never speak to you again."

"Both at the same time?" Keith hoisted a brown eyebrow.

"I'm going along now, Keith."

But Keith wasn't a captain in the transportation corps for nothing. "Wa-a-a-it a minute. I've got a tow rope. We'll tie that damned buggy on behind."

"Don't you dare hurt it."

"The tow rope?"

"The buggy. Gourd Head."

Five minutes later I found myself settled in Keith's car with Johnny in my arms and the wicker buggy tied behind like a trailer.

"Go slow," I would caution when Keith would forget himself and sally into spurts of speed. "I'll die if anything happens to that buggy."

"You're certainly in love with that hearse, aren't you?"

"I've got to be. The last buggy I had broke down on the street."

"Quit feeding your child so much."

"He was only two months old when that happened and he couldn't have broken down a doll carriage."

"Quit crying. I'll buy you a jinrikisha and trundle it myself if anything happens to your wicker antique."

Only twice on our way to my house did anyone pay any attention to our strange cavalcade. Once a roving police car slowed down beside us, while the two policemen inside gave us suspicious looks. But they finally

drove on. Then once a jalopy overflowing with high-school boys circled around and around us yelling, "Johnny got his zero. Johnny got his zero."

"Put a one before it and another zero after it and a per cent sign after that and I'll agree with you," I yelled back.

When we arrived in front of the Monoghan-Taylor apartment building, Keith went into the cause of the current quarrel that had made him show up at Sarah's party without his wife. It was the same thing that Adam and Eve had quarrelled over, and Mr. and Mrs. Othello, and Mr. and Mrs. Bluebeard, and over half of Hollywood. "My wife doesn't understand me," Keith wailed. At the same time he slipped his arm about my waist, Johnny and all.

"Is that bad?" I countered, slapping away his arm. "Maybe if she did, she couldn't stand it."

"Be careful, or I'll charge you car fare home."

I took another slug at his still-roving hands. "You're trying to charge me right now. Quit it, Keith, or you'll wake up my baby."

"Whyn't we put him back there in the baby buggy?"

"I'm taking him upstairs and putting him in his crib."

"Can I come along and help?"

"You certainly cannot. You're going on home."

"Okay, then I won't let you have your buggy."

"Okay, then I'll let out a screech that'll reach from here to the police station and call Denny Monoghan."

"Who's that? The Irish policeman you've got on the string?"

"The Irish plumber I've got on the first floor. With

a lot of iron pipe he'd be glad to bounce off your head."

How long this would have gone on I don't know, if Den hadn't happened to come along just then, very late from Lodge. "Den," I called in relief as I saw his bulky form emerge from the shadows cast by the tall elms that lined the street. "Come on over here and meet an old friend of John's."

Under his breath, Keith itemized a few Biblical characters in a highly unBiblical manner. "What's this Den person got that I haven't got?" he muttered.

"A little decency," I retorted.

"A nice line. Why don't we hang wash on it?"

"Not dirty linen, Keith." Then I thanked him coldly and firmly for bringing me home, got Den to untie the buggy, and Johnny and I marched on upstairs.

That should have been the end of Keith Bainbridge, but it wasn't. Mine is not the face that launched a thousand ships; but some men get ideas when Married Women Live Alone in Apartments.

Keith telephoned every night for the next two weeks. When I got to recognising his voice and hanging up on him, he took to sending telegrams. "Lonely widower would like to contact lonely widow. Object, conversation." Since when were you a widower and since when did they call that conversation, Keith? "I realise you're the intellectual type, Mae West. But why don't you come down and let me see you sometime, anyway?" A little too oaty, Keith. Sounds like a comic Valentine. "Wanted: A nice cozy fireplace to sit beside, and a nice broad-minded woman to

sit beside me." I'm glad you put that "minded" in there, Keith. Because I like to think I have a slim figure, even if I don't.

When I returned all Keith's telegrams, he took to hanging around the front door. "Why don't you find yourself somebody else?" I called out of the front window, taking care to keep the front door locked. "I could get you a few addresses from Den, who gets around to all the basements, or give you a few spot announcements over the radio."

"Don't bother," he called back. "I prefer mules who think they are hard to get, but who really aren't."

I slammed down the window.

Then I had a brainwave. I tore back to the window, flung open the sash and called down to my nefarious horseless Lochinvar. "You've broken my heart, honey bunch. Come back at nine tonight and I'll dust off a chair for you beside my cozy fireplace."

He grinned, so that I could see his two gold-capped front molars shining in the sun, even from my second story. "I knew you couldn't resist me. See you at nine."

That evening I rearranged the living-room so that it resembled a setting for *No Mother to Guide Her*. I piled the davenport full of pillows, lowered all the shades, loaded the bridge table with pretzels and bottles of beer, and turned out all the lights except for one glimmering floor lamp. My costume for the seduction scene was a satin dress I had worn in high school and had so outgrown that my bulges, or shall we be more kind and call them curves, looked anything but girlish in my school-girl dress.

Keith came swaggering in promptly at nine in civilian clothes, having cast off for the evening the role of officer and gentleman. "Wh-e-e-e-w" was all he said when he entered, as his eyes took in the stage setting. But he played it slow, first drinking the beer, yes even masticating a pretzel or two and leaving me at one end of the sofa, while he sat at the other end.

But finally Keith being Keith, he slid along the sofa until the four feet between us became three and then two and then none. Just as he was about to grab me, I stood up. "Oh, by the way, Keith, I'd like you to come on out into the kitchen and meet the rest of the people I invited to the party." I said it loud.

His eyebrows did a hula-hula dance. "Must I?"

"You'll love them, Keith."

"I'll bet I will."

Hearing their cues, Denny and Belinda came in from the darkened kitchen. Then from the back stairway came Sarah with her child on her arm, and Rose with hers, and Helen with hers.

"Meet Keith Bainbridge," I said, trying not to laugh at the look on Keith's face. "He's so good to war widows, I thought we should give a little party for him."

I'll say this for Keith. He was game. He stuck it out and ate pretzels and drank beer with us. He even talked shop with Den, reminiscing about how he worked part of his way through college as a plumber's assistant.

"Bet you specialised in them—how do you pronounce it—soriety houses," said Den, giving me a broad wink.

"Ugh-ugh," said Keith. "Women's gyms. I used

to bribe the gals to knock the faucets off the showers, so I could have an excuse to get into the place."

"Sure, an' I shoulda gone to college," said Den.

That evening finished Keith's role as a Lothario, so far as I was concerned. He came back, but this time he came to see Den. Den and Belinda got very fond of him, and after Meta left Keith for good, they would have him over for Sunday dinners and invite me to come along. We would all have a nice, cosy evening beside a nice cosy fireplace—Den's.

"I kinda like this guy," Keith would say, putting his arm around Den's broad back.

"So do I," I would say, patting Den's broad hand.

When Keith's wife finally got her divorce, Keith went around with such a hang-dog look we all felt sorry for him, and Den and Belinda got to inviting him over for mid-week dinners as well as Sundays. Keith went overseas soon after and was killed in battle. We all cried when we heard the news. "Sure an' I like to think we gave him a little touch of home before he passed on to the green shores," said Den.

Chapter Six

A PATERNAL INTEREST?

WILBUR SLEMMONS was another of those men who get ideas when Married Women Live Alone. Thirty years before I went down to work at WHIZ, Wilbur had married Kate, who was always going home to mother. Wilbur and Kate had one girl and two boys, but still Kate kept going home to mother. And she never took the children with her on her trips, so that their care fell to Wilbur. Then one time Kate went home to mother and never returned. Mother got Kate a divorce, and Wilbur got the children.

And to Wilbur's credit let it be said that he brought them up well. Alone. For Kate never came back and Wilbur never married again. Wilbur's pretty daughter married a well-to-do man in the East, and Wilbur's two handsome sons got handsome jobs on radio stations in New York City, before they went into the army, and made periodical trips back to see Wilbur. But they never made an effort to see their mother. They adored their father and he was so proud of them he would strut around like a puffed-up turkey-cock whenever he even got a letter from them.

No, Wilbur had been a family man whose trials and virtues would have passed the severest tests imposed by Mrs. Grundy, the Hayes office and the Seventh Day Adventists. He was the pride of Casper City as a

child-rearer, whose wife up and left him, poor dear, and he carried right on, poor dear.

But after his children left home, Wilbur took to straying. Never very far, you understand. For Wilbur was not like Keith. Keith was a wolf in wolf's clothing, while Wilbur in any kind of clothing was still a sheep. Keith was the Rollicking Rake, whereas Wilbur's approach, when there was any approach at all, was paternal with a touch of incest.

Also Wilbur's approach was bucolic. As you may have guessed from the hyper-thyroid stag and the mounted muskellunge that sagged down the walls of Wilbur's office, Wilbur was a huntsman. Not a deer-stalker or a bear-slayer like a Cooper hero or Teddy Roosevelt. Because the moth-eaten specimens in Wilbur's cubby-hole had all been given him by his brother twenty years before. Wilbur was, rather, a slayer of squirrels, a ravager of rabbits. He was also a baiter of bass, a puller-up of perch, and a terror of trout.

"Sure is a good fishing day," Wilbur would say, looking wistfully out of the window as I would come out of a broadcast. "Like to be out on good old Lake Goonberry this very minute, trailing a line from the side of a good old row-boat." His Waltonian flights of fancy would carry him so far afield, he would almost forget his telegraphic style. But not quite.

When the first snow powdered down, Wilbur changed his refrain. "Sure do like to see that white stuff pile up." After which he fell back on the scintillating Slemmons wit and added, "Hard for those cottontails to leave tracks in the grass, you know."

One golden afternoon in early September, while

mother was still with me, Wilbur finally got up nerve enough to ask me to go with him. And I went. Wilbur did it up brown. He brought along two bamboo fishing poles, hired a row-boat and bought bait—two buckets of lascivious Laocoons he called dew worms.

It was pleasant drifting around in the row-boat with the sun shining on Wilbur's pink dome, and frisky little breezes playing hide-and-seek with the sparkling water, and frost-touched elms and beeches showering down newly-minted gold coins.

I could see at once Wilbur knew a great deal about fishing. He knew how to put worms on a hook, how to cast a line without getting completely wound up in it after the first three trials, and how to flirt a hook through the breezes so that the wiggly bait didn't come back and land in your hair.

Yet with all his skill, Wilbur got only two fish. Throw-backs, he called them, since they were both too small to qualify under the game laws as the proper size to be drawn out of the lake.

I could see Wilbur was a little nettled at catching throw-backs. But he covered up the situation manfully and adroitly by saying, "Better to catch throw-backs than nothing, ha, ha. Keeps you in practice, you know."

And I, who had been catching nothing with monotonous repetition, nodded my head in complete agreement.

After a strenuous afternoon in the boat, Wilbur put in a strenuous evening eating. "Might as well have a bite of something before we go home," he said, sounding and looking for all the world like Winnie the Pooh,

as he squired me up a brown-velvet path that led to the rustic dining-room of Goonberry Inn at the head of Lake Goonberry.

Inside the Daniel Boone cabin of a dining-room, a cross-eyed, spare-rib thin waitress came reluctantly out to greet us. "What'll you have?" she said, slapping down menus as though she were dealing out a poker hand. Then before we could read the first line, she added in a rancid voice, "Ham's out. Beef's out. Pork's out. Gettin' late in the season."

Wilbur let out a funereal sigh. "Guess that leaves hash and salmon."

"Salmon's out. Fry you a coupla eggs," said Spare Ribs.

"Ham's out," countered Wilbur.

"Got bacon," said Spare Ribs.

"Okay," said Wilbur.

"Ditto," said I.

In the end, Wilbur had three pyramids of eggs and twelve Stonehenges of bacon. And three big cleats of apple pie, which really were choice, even if Spare Ribs did thwack them down as if she were doling out tombstones.

Wilbur proved to be the kind of Epicurean who explores each bite slowly and exhaustively as though reluctant to part with each molecule and at the same time looking forward avidly to the next. Watching Wilbur eat was like being in on the ground floor of a meat industry. You could see his plump body getting plumper before your very eyes as though soul and body were expanding in one glorious synthesis. And through it all no sound emerged except for the manly click of

Wilbur's fork against his plate, or his spoon against his coffee cup. For Wilbur was the strong, silent eater type, who did not waste his time in Small Talk, but gave his all to his food.

When the last piece of pie was laid away on the bulging shelves of Wilbur's stomach, Wilbur gave himself over to the process of digestion. "Le's go ou' an' si' on th' porch," he said, a glazed sound coming into his speech, and a glazed look coming into his eyes. "Neve' di' belie' in rushin' aroun' after a meal."

"Fine," I said. "Mind if I follow that little path out the window there and see where it goes? It's been intriguing me all through dinner."

"Go ri' ahead. 'll res' a minute."

It was more than a minute, because by the time I got back from a walk half around the lake, Wilbur was sleeping. I walked around the other half of the lake and Wilbur was snoring. I walked clear around the lake, picked a bouquet of daisies and golden glow in the glimmering dusk and then by the light of the early rising moon, skipped stones in the quicksilver water and when I went back, Wilbur was down flat on the porch swing. So I curled myself up in a deck-chair at the other end of the Lake Goonberry Inn porch and snored too.

I awoke with a naked light bulb and Spare Ribs glaring down at me. Grey, wraithlike shadows haunted the outer periphery of the glare, as moths big as bats flung themselves at the light bulb with suicidal frenzy.

"Git up. Git up. Can't have no goings-on like this here. This is a ree-specktable joint," Spare Ribs

was saying in her rancid voice. "Time to close, anyhow." From the emphasis in her voice on the latter, one would infer that Time to Close was more important than Goings On.

I tried to make my voice just as rancid as Spare Ribs'. "There weren't any goings on. He went to sleep on that side of the porch, and I went to sleep on this. And the sooner I get out of this place, the better it'll suit me."

Spare Ribs, I imagine, was known as a great wit by her coterie of friends, if she had any. "Suits me, too," she said with a toss of her horse-mane head.

Evidently she had already wakened Wilbur because he was yawning hugely and trying to knuckle the sleep out of his eyes. Spare Ribs hurried back across the porch and stood over him like a referee counting over the body of a stricken prize-fighter. "Want I should get some water an' throw it in your face? Come on, come on. I got to lock up."

Wilbur hoisted his ocean-liner body out of the squeaky porch swing with great difficulty. But I could see that his dinner was digested, anyway. The glazed look had left his eyes. "Guess we *had* better be going, Marion," he said to the backs of his finger-nails. Then with those heel-toe steps of his that always reminded me of a child's rocking-horse, he padded off the porch and I followed him.

We drove away on roads looped and laced with silver moonlight, past little lakes that shone out from prongs of pines like rich jewels on the hands of some dusky goddess. Choirs of frogs sang operas, orchestras of cicadas played timbrels, and the fir trees shook their

shadowy garments in the moonlight with their seductive perfume. It was a light opera night, a "Lady by yonder moon I swear" night, a night for romance, youth, and love, and gay intrigue. But not a night for having Wilbur Slemmons at your side.

But evidently Wilbur thought it was. He tried that stunt that must have been thought up by the first man who took the first woman out for a ride in the first horse cart. Wilbur turned off on a side road and parked. Right in the middle of an assemblage of deep, dark shadows.

"Huh ungh, Wilbur. I've got to get home."

"'S early yet. Can't be more'n eleven."

"Johnny has to have his bottle."

"'R mother can give him his bottle."

"But it's so gruesome-looking around here. These maple trees look as though they're talking over the latest murder mystery."

"Got me to protect you."

I didn't think that was anything at all, but I didn't dare say so. I tried another tack. "I've got a headache, Wilbur."

"Night air's wonderful for headaches. Take a couple of deep breaths and bingo. Headache's gone. Tried it myself dozens of times. Better than aspirin."

What I wanted to do was take a couple of deep breaths and run. But what are you going to do when somebody has been nice to you and you don't want to let him down too hard? I finally gave up and let Wilbur have his kiss. "Just one," I admonished. "And then if you don't take me home, I'm going to walk."

"Always a gentleman," said Wilbur.

Don't get the idea my lips are like wine. But it had been such a long time since Wilbur had had a kiss, I found myself in the middle of a full Nelson.

"When I said one kiss, I didn't mean it was to last all night," I said.

Wilbur didn't say anything. He went right on kissing.

I wrestled back, while Wilbur, that veteran of World War I, re-fought the Battles of Belleau Woods and Chateau-Thierry, right there in the front seat of his battered car. It was trench-warfare, too. Sort of low down. None of that adroit, Panzer-division stuff with Wilbur.

Then suddenly a finger of moonlight reached down through the trees and searched out Wilbur's car and highlighted his shiny dome and his Winnie the Pooh face. The look of the impassioned lover was so incongruous that I began to giggle while I was parrying and thrusting.

That did it. Wilbur straightened up and began to encase himself with ice. "Don't see anything funny ——"

"It's—it's nothing. Just—— Ho, ho, ho, and ha, ha, he." The finger of moonlight had chucked Wilbur under the chin and I was plunged again into gales of laughter.

Wilbur stepped on the self-starter as though he were stamping out snakes. "Guess you'd better be getting back to your baby."

"Fine, Wilbur." Giggle, giggle, chuckle. I tried to stuff my mouth with my handkerchief, but still the helpless mirth gripped me.

Wilbur slammed gears and the car leaped forward like a stricken stag. "Tell me the joke, so I can laugh, too."

"It isn't anything, really." Chuckle, chuckle, chortle. "I often used to get these fits in school." Ho, ho, he. "The teacher was always sending me out of the room."

Wilbur whizzed off the side road as though he were sending me out of the room too. "'S funniest thing I ever heard of."

I was home twice as fast as a taxi driver could have taken me and three times as straight.

"Thanks for a lovely time, Wilbur."

"Don't mention it." There was that in his tone which told me he meant that literally, so I dashed on upstairs.

The next day when I went down to the radio station, Wilbur looked at me like one strange alley cat facing another strange alley cat over the back fence.

"Sure is a nice day today, Wilbur."

"Sure is."

"Even nicer than yesterday. And that was a honey."

Wilbur's cheeks were pale, but colour was rising in his glaciated dome. "Seems that way."

"Autumn is the nicest time of year anyway, don't you think?"

"Sure is."

After exchanging a few more scintillating gems about the weather, I went in for my broadcast. When I came out again, Wilbur had disappeared.

Wilbur remained gelid for the next few weeks. Then a kind of spring set in and he began to thaw. He was

just about to go into summer and ask me for another date, when Eloise, the pretty young girl, who was Johnny's love and the switchboard operator, got married, and Maria Antoinetta Teresa Marguerite Bourbon Valois del Savoy Jones came down to chant, "Good mor-r-rning. R-R-Radio Station WHIZ-Z-Z, 850 on your radio dial," in the front office.

Maria Antoinetta etc. etc. Jones was a tall girl with a stiff walk which she desperately hoped was regal. She had a big mouth sedulously plastered with lipstick the colour, consistency and density of squashed strawberries. Above the strawberries was skin that looked like cream, all right, but that yellowish, gaumy kind of cream that has sat around in your refrigerator a couple of days. She also had a big nose and small eyes, black and hard like chips of jet. Her bobbed hair was dark and shining, but it had that whacked off look you get with a pair of manicure scissors and a bowl over your head at home.

Within five minutes after she had arrived to work at WHIZ everyone had her case history.

"Ever hear of the houses of Valois, Bourbon and Savoy?" she asked me, when I went over to introduce myself.

I couldn't help it. Something about the would-be Garbo smirk on her face made me assume the Bob Hope approach. "Straight Bourbon I've heard of, and we've got a Savoy House in my home town on the wrong side of the track. But Valois, no."

Maria Antoinetta recoiled as though I had bit her. Then she zipped up her mouth so hard a white line appeared around the squashed strawberries. But she

unzipped it again. "They are three of the oldest ruling houses in Europe and I am descended from all of them."

There are so many things I could have replied; but with a supreme effort I restrained myself and all I said was, "My, that's interesting."

Maria lit up like a neon sign. "You know, my dear. My brother has a claim to the throne of Italy. And he'd be sitting on it today if it weren't for Mussolini. You know, my dear, my father died when I was a little girl, and Mussolini put a price on the heads of my mother, my brother, and me, and we had to get out. Mussolini supported Victor Emmanuel, you know, and we were just too dangerous to have around. So one day we just had to walk out of our marble palace as though we were going after groceries and we never went back. Instead we got smuggled over the border. Mussolini confiscated all our estates."

Maria went on like something you lift from the pages of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* and learn by heart. "The house of Valois was a branch of the Capetian dynasty, which occupied the throne of France from 1328 to 1589. It began with Charles, second son of King Philip III, who got the County of Valois from his father in 1285. And then the line ran down to Henry III of France, but when he died and left no son, the crown went to Henry IV of Navarre of the House of Bourbon."

The Bob Hope in me insisted on bubbling to the surface. "Good old Bourbon. Always such a good mix."

Maria shot me a basilisk look from her obsidian

eyes. But the *Encyclopædia Britannica* went right on. "The house of Savoy, from which I am directly descended on my father's side, is the oldest reigning house in Europe. We're half French and half Italian, and have been for years, so I think in Italian and French, translating things in my mind before I say them in English."

I wanted to ask her how her English came out of that maze of Italian and French so thoroughly Americanised it had a Middle-Western accent. But I didn't. I asked the other question that had been burning me up ever since she had introduced me to her full name. I asked how Jones got into the houses of Valois, Bourbon, and Savoy.

Maria sighed and leaned a clotted-cream cheek on a skinny hand. "It was when I was being presented at the Court of England, my dear, that I met poor Albert. He was an American importer with a lot of money. His speciality was antiques, simply fabulous, my dear. I was seventeen, and I was simply carried away. My mother and brother, of course, expected me to marry back into one of the ruling houses. But I eloped with Albert. We travelled all over the world."

I knew she expected me to say, "How exciting," at this point, so I said, "How exciting." And tried not to yawn while I did it.

"Oh yes, my dear. That's why I'm as much at home in Singapore and Paris and Bangkok and May-hee-co, as I am at Rome."

"And Casper City?" I added.

She nodded. But I noticed that the obsidian eyes got a little film over them.

"And where is poor Albert now?" I asked. "Here in Casper City with you, gathering antiques?"

The sarcasm bounded up and over the thatched head. "Oh no, my dear. My brother Alfonso tracked us down and made me divorce poor Albert and get engaged to one of the Greek princes. It broke poor Albert's heart, when Alfonso took me back to Rome."

"And where is poor Albert now?"

"I don't know," she said in a sepulchral voice. "He—He just disappeared and I never heard from him again." She made little washing motions with her skinny hands. "But some day, my dear, he'll walk back into my life. I just know he will. I'll look up from somewhere, and there'll be poor Albert. Looking down at me the way he always did."

I was a glutton for punishment, so I asked still another question. "And the Greek prince? Did you finally marry him? And why aren't you living in Greece instead of Casper City?"

Maria swallowed her glottis and her epiglottis in her grief. "My brother tried to make me, but I—I just couldn't. I—I'll never marry anyone after poor dear Albert."

I knew she was good for at least eight more chapters of poor Albert, but it was time for my broadcast, so I excused myself.

When I came out of the broadcasting room, Bill Deal was waiting for me. He winked. "If you haven't gotten all the low-down on the houses of Valois, Bourbon, and Savoy, yet, let me enlighten you. I've only heard the yarn sixteen times since nine o'clock this morning."

"Don't bother, Bill. I've already had it. Roofs are a little leaky on those houses, don't you think?"

Bill chuckled. "Couple of windows out too, so that a bunch of bats flew in."

"Who hired her?"

"The big boss. Says he couldn't find anyone else. There's a war on, you know." The big boss was the handsome owner of the radio station who was always so busy either in his office or over at his other radio station that I hadn't yet been introduced to him.

"The war must be going worse than I thought," I said, "when they have to go into the lunatic asylums to get switchboard operators."

As the days passed, Maria continued to grieve volubly for poor Albert. But at the same time, she made a play for everything in pants down at the office. She tried out her wiles on Bill Deal, who was as impervious to her charms as The Great Stone Face. She cooed around Jerry Parks, in controls, and Ellis Wentworth, spots and straight broadcasting, who were both cousins of the big boss, to say nothing of Frank Blaine, who did spots and sports, and was a brother of the big boss. Naturally she didn't overlook Emory Wheeler, who did spots and farm news, and was a nephew of the big boss and so handsome that women flocked around him like flies around a watermelon at a summer picnic. That failing, she even rose to the top of the hierarchy and rolled her obsidian eyes at the big boss himself. When she drew a blank here, too, she dealt herself a card off the bottom of the deck and tried picking up the janitor.

All was barren, however. Until she got around to

Wilbur. And the funny part was that when she succeeded in snagging him after two weeks of hard work, I felt a little bad about it. He was such a nice guy at heart, I wish he could have remained paternal toward me without the incest.

We could never be sure whether Wilbur liked old houses, or mad, glad, sad tales about Rome, Singapore, Bangkok, and May-hee-co. Or just plain Sex. But we could guess.

"I could dig up a bunch of phone numbers Wilbur could call and not have to take all that guff about the time poor dear Albert and I were presented to the King of Siam, or the Emperor of China, or Haile Selassie," Bill Deal said to me. "He sure is a glutton for punishment."

"He sure is," I nodded. "Who is the Emperor of China, anyway? I thought it was Chiang Kai Shek who was the big shot over there."

"I wouldn't know," said Bill. "I've never been any nearer to the Orient than Chinatown in San Francisco, myself."

Anyhow, Wilbur, as usual, did his wooing up brown. He took Maria out to dinner, which we all heard about from Maria from tomato cocktail to apple pie. He took her to the movies. And he took her to a horse race. Then he took up where he and I had left off—he took her out fishing.

They must have caught nothing but throwbacks because we heard very little about the actual fishing, only about the wonderful bait and the rods and the reels. And I presume they dined and digested their dinners at Lake Goonbury in the same fashion Wilbur

and I had and were thrown out by Spare Ribs because Maria raved on and on about the food at Lake Goonberry, but she said she didn't like the waitress and was going to complain to the manager about her. "And how about the side road afterwards?" I wanted to ask her. But I didn't. I restrained myself and merely asked how she had her eggs—fried, boiled, or poached.

And Maria was so mad she shut up and wouldn't answer me.

Then the snow set in and Wilbur and Maria took to hunting. Sundays, when it was hard to check up on their activities. But we heard all about the great, splendid sport that went into tracking rabbits in the snow. And bringing down squirrels.

Michigan is the kind of country where, when cold weather sets in, you see people driving around with bears or deer tied to the sides of their cars. Most of the drivers must leave the wild life on their automobiles until they rot off in the spring because I have seen the same cars day after day with precisely the same mammals sagging them down, each time leaving a rather riper perfume in the wind.

I knew it would be only a matter of time before Wilbur would come down to the office with a bear decorating his ancient Ford. And sure enough, one Monday in December, when I appeared down at WHIZ, Maria was simpering all over the place, and Wilbur insisted on leading me down to the street, where the deadest, most malodorous bear I have ever seen and smelled in my life lay strapped to his running board.

"What'd he die of, Wilbur?" I asked. "Decomposition or leprosy?"

I shouldn't have said it. A hurt look came into Wilbur's face as he mumbled, "Hardening of the arteries."

I got out the salve, quick. "Gee, he's really something, Wilbur. How'd you ever shoot him?"

You could just hear the air bursting into Wilbur's chest. "'Slong story. Had my eye on him for weeks. Lots of work to track 'em down, you know."

"But weren't you scared when you met him face to face and had to take a shot at him?"

Wilbur shook his head as though he shot bears every morning for breakfast. "Naw. Nothing to it." Then he rubbed his pink dome. "Always do feel a little something at that, though, when I get a bear. This one was a stinker."

"Still is," I said, as the wind shifted. "I mean, sure must have been."

More air whooshed into Wilbur's chest. "You know how you do it, don't you? Got to have lots of snow so you can track their tracks in the woods. Got to have a good deep woods, too, without many people around. Then you just keep at it until you stalk 'em down."

"From Sunday to Sunday?"

Wilbur nodded, thereby giving me the impression bear hunting was just like tatting. You picked it up whenever you had a free moment.

"But don't you use dogs or horses or falcons, or any of that stuff?" I asked.

"Only your wits," said Wilbur. "That's fox-hunting you're thinking of."

"A mere bagatelle beside bear hunting," I said.

Wilbur nodded. "Sure. Got to be wary as an Indian, to get bear. And twice as fast."

I thought of Wilbur's over-stuffed upholstery rocking-horsing through the snow to get bear, and it was all I could do to keep from giggling. "How do you know when to shoot, Wilbur?"

Wilbur struck what he hoped was a "Bring 'Em Back Alive" pose. "When you know you can hit him. Can't be too far off or too close."

"What happens if you're too close?"

This time Wilbur didn't fall back on the good old Slemmons wit. He fell back on a good old New Yorker cartoon published about ten years ago and reprinted every hunting season since. "Then the bear comes driving back with you strapped to the side of his car."

This gave me a legitimate opportunity to get rid of all my repressed giggles, so I made the most of it. Wilbur beamed as though he had just laid a twenty-four carat egg studded with Koh-i-noor diamonds.

It was time to go on up and broadcast, so I had to terminate my fascinating conversation with the only man I have ever known who says he personally shot a bear. Furthermore, since I am absolutely ignorant about bear-hunting, I shall have to leave it up to you to decide whether Wilbur's methods were usual or unusual. Of course, there was one other authority on shooting bears available—Maria. But I was afraid consulting her would only result in another gush of talk and a dead end worse than Wilbur's, so I desisted.

When I got out of my broadcast, Bill was waiting for me again. "Get a look at Wilbur's bear?"

"How could I miss? What do you suppose Old Garbage Can really died of?"

"Not of Wilbur, anyway."

"Do you suppose Wilbur's brother could have given him that corpse, the same as he gave Wilbur all that mounted stuff in his office?"

Bill not only shook his head, but scratched it too. "Couldn't have. His brother's been dead for fifteen years."

"So has the bear."

Bill laughed. Then he added, "I've been hunting through Wilbur's desk to see if I could find a bill from some butcher or zoo for renting Wilbur a dead carcass. But I couldn't find a thing."

"Maybe they're waiting for the first of the month."

But they weren't. From that day to this, the great mystery story up at radio station WHIZ was not "Mr. and Mrs. North," or "Suspense." It was "How and Where Did Wilbur Slemmons Get His Bear?" And also, "When?"

Chapter Seven

MISS HATTYE

It was exactly one week and a day after Wilbur showed up with his bear that I got another radio programme. After Jim Greene rationed mothers on the number of children they could bring down to his beauty parlour, his business picked up again to boom proportions. And when he found a run-down beauty parlour in a good section of town and had a chance to buy it for a song, he signed the contract.

The only thing was that he had to take Miss Hattye Schumacker along with the business. Miss Hattye had been owning and operating Miss Hattye's Beautee Shoppe so long she couldn't face life without it. "I h-wouldn't h-want my h-customers to h-think I was h-letting them h-down," was the way Miss Hattye put it in her highly aspirated voice. "H-What's Miss Hattye's Beautee H-Shoppe without H-Miss Hattye?"

Anyway, H-Miss Hattye's Beautee H-Shoppe with Miss Hattye needed conversion and fast, as I found out when I went over there with Jim to see about a series of new broadcasts for the new shop.

In the first place, Jim and I climbed two flights of dirt-crusted stairs with a monotonous succession of dirty blue, green and red signs announcing that if you washed your teeth with Toothident Nos. 1, 2, and 3,

they would shine in the dark, shine in the dark, shine in the dark. "Use Toothident and quit buying flashlights," I remarked to Jim after I had stepped over the ninety-ninth sign.

"Use Toothident, and I'll shoot you," he replied, gritting his teeth. "I'm taking down every last inscription, scrubbing these stairs with lye and putting on new linoleum. Also I am taking off these lousy doors up there and hurling them in the city dump."

By now we were on the third landing, facing a pair of portals that looked as though they had been lifted from Dinty's Saloon, *circa* 1880. I fully expected to find a mahogany bar inside, all set up with foaming mugs of beer and three or four curvaceous nudes hung above on the wall. But instead there were three forlorn little booths in a room big enough to hold the annual fireman's ball. The booths had chairs in them that looked as though they had been used to treat dental patients during the Civil War. There were no customers to be seen. Only three creaky operators who looked mothy and desiccated, like something you see in a badly-kept museum.

"I'm going to change all this, including the help," Jim whispered. "In a month from now you won't know the place. It's the location I'm after."

Miss Hattye, who I'll bet was born plain Harriet, was thin and angular; she also suffered from acne. You can see she got into this business because she thought it would do her some good, I thought. And the poor thing is still hoping.

Miss Hattye's aspirates were going like organ stops when she came out from behind the two faded Japanese

screens that served as her office, to greet us. "You're h-getting the most h-wonderful little place, Mr. H-Greene. I h-swear I h-shouldn't have h-let it h-go, should I?" she said, turning to me.

I was in a tight spot, so I tore a leaf out of Jim's note-book. "It's in a wonderful location," I said.

"You wouldn't h-believe that I've done h-with this h-place," Miss Hattye went on aspirating. "It was h-nothing, h-nothing at all when I h-started it out. And now h-look at it."

"You h-look at it," I said to myself. But to Miss Hattye, I said, "My, my."

Jim cut into our brilliant conversation. "This is Mrs. Taylor, Miss Schumacker. She's going to do some broadcasting for us."

Miss Hattye clapped her hands to her abbreviated bosom like a sweet girl graduate who has just received her first wrist watch. "H-Broadcasting. It's h-just h-wonderful. But you won't h-need Mrs. Taylor, Mr. h-Greene. I am h-wonderful at h-writing my h-self. I have been h-writing since I was h-sixteen years old."

My lips twitched, but somehow I managed to keep the rest of my face under strict control. "What kind of things do you write, Miss Hattye?"

The chicken claw hands found their old roost on the skinny bosom. "H-Stories, h-poems, h-riddles, h-jokes. I can h-write just about h-anything."

"And radio?" I nudged her too obliging memory. "Have you done much with that? It's more or less a field by itself, you know."

A rapturous smile came into Miss Hattye's pitted face. "Oh, h-yes. I h-won a h-limerick contest once

h-put on by the Casper City h-Drug h-Store, and it was h-broadcast over h-WHIZ. And once when I h-visited h-Chicago, I h-was h-put on the 'Hello, h-Travellers' h-program. Everybody said I was h-just h-wonderful. I h-won a h-trip through all the h-night h-clubs."

Trying not to disgrace myself by giggling, I said, "How exciting," in a most unexciting tone.

Miss Hattye wound right up like a yo-yo. "Oh, it h-was. And h-you know, after the h-first h-two or h-three minutes, I h-wasn't a h-bit scared."

I was just about to ask what she did with the first two minutes when she was scared, when Jim intervened. "You may work up some sample scripts any time you want to, Miss Hattye, but in the meantime we'll let Marion take over. We'll begin by saying that Miss Hattye's Beautee Shoppe is going to close for two weeks for repairs. And then we're going to be open for business in entirely new surroundings."

"But, Jim," I said. "How're you ever going to get the new surroundings, much less in two weeks? You can hardly find a stick of wood these days and to find anybody to help you is almost impossible."

"I can still buy paint," Jim replied. "And I've still got my good right arm, even if I did get my left one banged up in World War I. And if you've never seen the slip covers and drapes Kathy can run up on her sewing machine, you haven't seen anything."

I hadn't either. In one week, Jim and Kathy had drowned the faded cabbage roses and butterflies on the streaked wallpaper with lemon yellow Kemtone, and covered the chipped brown paint on the lintels and

woodwork with shiny black lacquer. As for the windows, Jim scrubbed them until they shone, and Kathy decorated them with mandarins and Geisha girls sporting about on lemon yellow and black chintz. She dug up some chairs and couches from somewhere and deftly slip-covered them with more mandarins and Geisha girls. Even the swinging doors lost their Shooting of Dan McGrew look when Jim painted them black and Kathy decorated them with panels of more gay Chinese figures.

"It's wonderful," I said when I stopped around to look. "Somebody must have loaned you a fairy wand. But what are you going to do about the front stairs and Toothident."

Jim grinned and scrambled a metaphor. "Hold your horses. Rome wasn't built in a day. We're going to take up the Saga of the Stairs next week."

I don't know how they did it. But sure enough, Jim and Kathy sanded most of the valleys out of the bosoms of the stairs, got rid of the signs and covered the stained woodwork with shining black lacquer and the blemished, high-vaulted walls and ceilings with lemon yellow.

"Any time you're tired of the hair-do business, you can go in for interior decorating," I said enthusiastically. "Pigsties to palaces in ten easy steps."

"Not exactly easy," laughed Jim. "And lots more than ten steps."

Kathy pretended to walk lame and cough like a consumptive. "Where I haven't got Charley horses, I've got painter's colic."

They didn't stop with the physical features of their

new shoppe. They even went in for redecorating Miss Hattye. The next time I saw her, the hard-tack bun at the back of her head had given way to soft curls that went far to ameliorate her poor little acne-ridden face. And she was wearing a becoming new white uniform that Kathy had made for her that made Miss Hattye appear not only efficient, but almost pretty.

"Miss Hattye, you look like a new woman," I said.

"H-Thank you," said Miss Hattye, a shine coming into her faded-iris eyes. "It's all the h-Greene's h-doings."

"Give us two more months," said Jim, who was standing nearby, puttying up a window pane, "and Dr. Sproule and I are going to have most of that acne off Miss Hattye's face. She's going to look so beautiful *Vogue* is going to be after her to pose for pictures."

"I h-really believe you h-will," said Miss Hattye, so pleased she blushed like a Jonathan apple.

As for Miss Hattye's three frayed assistants, they had disappeared off the premises. "I got one a job in a laundry where she can make use of her shampoo experience," laughed Jim. "And the other two are working in the food factory at more money than Miss Hattye was paying them. After all, there's a limit to what you can renovate."

I was so enthusiastic about the new Miss Hattye's Beautee Shoppe and the New Miss Hattye, that I put everything I had into my new "For Beautiful Hands and Hair Go to Miss Hattye's" programme. "We'll keep the old Band Box programme a discussion of general beauty problems and the new series a discussion

of more specific ones," Jim said, and the plan seemed to work fine. In fact, everything worked out fine because within a month Jim was hiring new operators and opening up new booths in both shops.

"If I could only find another shop at a price I could afford, I'd snap it right up," Jim said. "The beauty business is a natural right now. More people have more money to spend than they've ever had before. And there's so little to spend it on, they come in here and dump it on beauty—permanents, finger waves, manicures—the works. And that suits me right down to the ground."

I couldn't help it. I thought of John and the rest of the men fighting on far-off battlefields while people at home were flinging their money around and Jim was making it hand over fist. Then I remembered how Jim had been hit by shrapnel and gassed in World War I so that he was never free from pain and a racking cough. He's earned his prosperity, I thought. If a man goes through the hell of one war, he's got a right to a little happiness and prosperity in the next. And besides, it couldn't happen to a nicer guy.

But this is not the end of the success story of Jim and Kathy Greene. There were several stubborn little items of conflict in the plot, and they got pretty bad before they were resolved.

The first was the fact that Miss Hattye couldn't forget about her yen for broadcasting. "Oh, Mr. H-Greene, do let me show you I can h-do before a h-microphone. I—h-well, I'm not h-trying to h-beat Mrs. H-Taylor out of her h-job. But I h-would like to have a h-chance," she said to Jim almost every time

he and I went into the shop to talk over new programmes with her and her operators.

"What am I going to do," Jim asked, when he and I got back down to the street. "I don't want to get rid of Miss Hattye because I can't run both places at once and she does know something about beauty even if this place was terribly run-down when I took it over. Furthermore, she's entirely honest and I can trust her when I have to be over at the Band Box, and that's worth a lot. But she just won't give up this idea she's going to broadcast."

I nodded and wrinkled up a perplexed forehead. Then I got an idea. "Why don't we give her a chance on the air in an interview and see what she can do? Then if she flops, she'll maybe stop talking about it of her own accord, and if she doesn't, you can work her in now and then and maybe keep her satisfied. You never can tell, Jim. You may be thwarting a genius."

"Want to bet? I'll give you both heads and tails, and I'll still win."

I too had a feeling Miss Hattye wouldn't turn out to be Orson Welles, but I had no idea she would turn out to be one of the worst blackouts of the war. In fact, she and I worked out a script in which I asked her about her experiences in helping people to beautify themselves that sounded pretty good. And in our rehearsal of it, even her aspirates didn't sound too bad. And she approached the microphone fairly calmly —at the dress rehearsal.

"You're going to be fine, Miss Hattye," I said, after going over the script for the second time. "Just

imagine that you're talking to a group of your friends, and you'll be all right."

Miss Hattye giggled like one of the Three Little Maids from School. "Oh, it's h-going to be h-so exciting I h-can hardly h-wait."

"Just keep on feeling that way, and you're going to be as good as Lady Esther," I said.

When the morning of the broadcast arrived, Miss Hattye fluttered into the reception-room of WHIZ in silk and velvet flounces. Her hair had just been freshly curled, and her make-up was brave as a banner. "You didn't forget that it was radio you were appearing on and not television, did you?" I asked.

"Oh, my h-no," giggled Miss Hattye. "I h-just wore these h-clothes because it h-seemed like h-such a h-big event in my h-life."

"I'm sure it will be."

I noticed Miss Hattye was a little pale when we sat down at the broadcasting table. But she wasn't trembling, anyway, and as Jerry Parks in the control-room gave us the go-ahead sign, she even managed a little smile.

I went ahead with my introduction and then posed the first question I was supposed to ask her in her interview. "Miss Hattye, what do you consider the greatest change you have brought about in anyone in your thirty years in the beauty business?"

Miss Hattye looked up at me and opened her mouth like a goldfish gasping for food. And then, just as though I were the Gorgon Medusa, her mouth froze that way as she turned to stone. And she sounded like stone, too, when she fainted dead away, and her

head hit the microphone and dashed it to the floor. The next thing I knew, I heard Jerry Parks saying, "Due to conditions beyond our control, we will now leave our studios," and music went on the air.

It took a full thirty minutes of water dashing and wrist chafing and smelling salts to bring Miss Hattye to. Finally breath came back into her sparse body. But not her courage.

"I h-never knew h-broadcasting was h-so hard," she aspirated, still green about the eyes and mouth. "I—I —h-well, I h-don't know exactly h-what hit me. I h-don't believe I ever h-want to h-face a microphone again. I h-guess I was h-just a h-lot younger when I was on the 'Hello, Travellers' h-program."

We certainly loused up that programme brown, I thought to myself, as I tried to comfort Miss Hattye. But probably for the first time in radio history, the sponsor is going to be tickled to death.

Jim was right about Miss Hattye's acne. In a couple of months, he and Dr. Sproule had most of the mountains and valleys out of Miss Hattye's face. And people noticed the living advertisement Miss Hattye was to the place, and came in in droves with their skin and hair problems. Jim made Dr. Sproule and several other town physicians accoutrements to the beauty business and Miss Hattye was as proud of each new cure as she had been of her own.

But one morning when Jim and I dropped around to see Miss Hattye, we found her in tears.

"What's the matter?" we chorused.

Miss Hattye went into a new shower in her handkerchief. "It's the h-most h-dreadful h-thing that has

happened to Miss Hattye's H-Beauty H-Shoppe in thirty h-years."

"What's the most dreadful thing?" I asked.

Miss Hattye lifted a tear-blotched face. "She's h-gone to h-get her h-lawyer. She h-says I've h-ruined her."

"Who's gone to get her lawyer?" asked Jim.

Miss Hattye groped for a new Kleenex. "After h-all you've h-done for me, Mr. H-Greene, to h-think I should h-forget about her h-test h-curl."

"What's a test curl?" I asked Jim.

"Before you dye hair, you're supposed to snip off a lock of the patient's hair and see how the dye is going to take on it," said Jim.

"It was h-perfectly awful," wailed Miss Hattye. "It could h-ruin the h-whole h-business."

Jim handed Miss Hattye another Kleenex. "What could ruin the whole business? Come on and get to the point."

"It h-must have been the h-sulphur in her h-system. I h-don't know h-what else h-could have h-done it," said Miss Hattye, still not getting to the point.

But the way it turned out, she didn't need to. Because at that precise moment, there was a stamp of angry feet on the stairs, and the Orientalised bar-room doors burst open like the jaws of a snapping turtle. A very large woman came into the room, leading by the arm a very small man whom I recognised as Jack Anderson, a lawyer who had his office two doors down from WHIZ.

The woman was muffled up in one of those Red Riding Hood types of coats and hoods, so that I could see little more than her eyes. But she was puffing like

an adder sired by a steam engine, and the little skin I could see showing out of the hood was the colour and consistency of pressed ham. She shook a log of a fist under Miss Hattye's nose. "I'll teach you to ruin my looks," she yelled. "You may have fixed me so I'll be a laughing-stock for weeks. But I'm going to put you in jail."

Miss Hattye didn't ruin your looks, I thought. Your mother beat her to it by fifty years.

Jack Anderson gave a legal cough. "I think Mrs. Higgins has an excellent case."

Jim sighed and rolled his eyes toward heaven. "Will someone *please* tell me what all this is about?"

Mrs. Higgins gave him a Sarah Bernhardt look. "This is what it's all about," she shrieked. Then she snatched off her Red Riding Hood cloak, like Sir Walter Raleigh about to fling down his cape for Queen Elizabeth.

We saw what she was going to sue about all right. Her hair, still grey at the roots was sprouted over with the brightest, shamrockiest shade of green I have ever viewed in my life.

Jim and I did the worst thing we could possibly have done. We stood there and laughed.

Mrs. Higgins blew up like a Superman Space Ship. "You—you think it's funny, do you? I'm going to tell everyone in Casper City the way you've treated me. I'm going around block by block and house by house and show 'em my green hair. And then I'm going to come back and picket this place with my green hair."

Jack Anderson patted her hammy shoulders. "That won't be necessary, Mrs. Higgins. We'll go to court

with an all-women jury and all we'll have to do is to give 'em one glimpse of that hair and we'll have the verdict sewed up."

To make a long story short, Mrs. Higgins and her emerald hair never got to court. Jim ended up by paying Mrs. Higgins two hundred dollars damages and offering her an abject apology. The apology seemed to appease her about as much as the two hundred dollars.

"It's a lot of money to pay for a laugh," Jim said to me with his lop-sided smile. "But anyway, the laugh was a good one. And besides, they always say the price of things goes up during a war."

Chapter Eight

STANLEY'S PROGRESS

About big-time radio stations I know practically nothing. I walked through Radio City once, and had guest tickets to the Breakfast Club up in Chicago once, and for three solid years I bombarded NBC and CBS, New York, with daytime, evening, and whodunit serials and ideas for novelty quiz programmes and novelty giveaway shows and ways of brightening up news broadcasts and home hints and recipes. I have also pestered the *Doctor Christian* programme with single-shot scripts I was sure would be barn-burners, and the *Stars Over Hollywood* programme and the *Grand Central Station* and *Suspense* and the *Cavalcade of America*.

In fact, I still have three trunks of manuscripts sitting in the basement that I used for ammunition, and the only thing that ever hit the target even obliquely was a fifteen-minute one-act play on Margaret Fuller, a girl friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson. I thought I was sending the one-act to the Samuel French Company for their perusal, but I got it by mistake into the envelope in which I was sending some material to the *Cavalcade of America* programme for their perusal. The *Cavalcade* people turned down all the scripts I had written specially for them, but they were interested in the play I had written specially for French. They didn't want the play, though, they just wanted the idea. The play was

only fifteen minutes long, and their programme was a half-hour long, as I should know if I ever listened to their programmes, and if I intended writing for radio I would have to learn something about the format, which they were sending me samples of under separate cover. But the drama in the play was interesting and some of the dialogue sparkled and all in all they thought they might use the germ idea and they'd like to buy the rights for $25.00 so that I couldn't sue them when they put a really good writer on the job. Not a line about the plays intended for *Cavalcade*, which showed (I thought) a mature use of radio format. I guess Samuel French didn't like the plays intended for *Cavalcade* which got into his envelope by mistake, either, because he fired them all back without even buying the germ ideas.

All in all I've got not three trunks of rejects in the basement, but six, if you count all the short stories, the novels, the sonnets, the quatrains, the odes and the epics I've tried out on editors. I've only met one other person worse off in that regard than I am. He was a composer and he had eight trunks of song, symphony, operetta and opera rejects. In the living-room, though. Not in the basement. He was married and he had three children and he taught in a college and had to entertain a lot of friends. But those trunks stayed right in the living-room where he could get them out quick in case of a fire. His wife threatened to put them in the basement, but he threatened to leave her if she did. So she resigned herself to her fate and slip-covered the trunks and had her guests sit on them or use them for end tables and card tables.

But with all the cold-shouldering I got from big-time radio, small-time radio has now and then taken me to its ample, corn-fed bosom. Small-time radio may blat on and on about beer, gospels, the corn crops, and the latest thing in chick mash, and the blight that has fallen on the peach and apple orchards, and absolutely the hottest dope on eggs in twenty years, and what the soy bean crops have been doing over the week-end, and who won what golden doughnuts at the county fair, but it's still Show Business. And as Show Business it still attracts the two kinds of people Show Business always attracts—those who would like to get rich quick in it, and those who are so bursting out all over with histrionics they would rather be poor than make a decent living in a grocery store or a shoe store or an undertaking parlour.

The big boss was a combination of both, and he had a biography to prove it, as I soon learned after I went up to work at WHIZ. As a boy on a farm, complete with cheek of tan, bare feet, and horny hands that could plough the straightest furrow in Rosner County, Stanley Blaire used to do take-offs at ice-cream socials and school festivals and Grange picnics and the local beer taverns. In fact, Stanley got so good at it, he was making more money at it than his father was off his prize heifers until Stanley got to taking off the wrong people. So Stanley took to reciting ballads, many of them home-made and local in character, to the tune of a guitar bequeathed to him by his grandfather. People wanted Stanley to donate his ballads to Fourth of July celebrations and Harvest Home suppers and Holy Roller conventions, but Stanley always managed never quite to work for

free. He loved crowds and the fact that people wanted him to entertain would bring a gleam to his dark eyes and his even then matinée idol face. He would never turn down a chance to appear in public, not Stanley. But he always managed to pass the hat, or a tin cup, or a paper plate "for just a little something for Stan, folks. Sure hate to do this, but my gittar is kinda wearing out, folks. Gramp used it for forty years and my great-gramp used it for forty years before that and I gotta buy a little gut for it. Besides, I gotta help my sister save up for college, and I sure do hate to think about selling magazines. I'd a lot rather sing for folks, especially such a bunch of darned nice folks as you are, so any little thing you can put in this little old straw hat will sure help. Juanita'll be so pleased she'll come out and jig for you, and I'll favour you with another ballad just made up for you folks in Rosner County."

Sometimes he would use the method employed by the old Elizabethan acting troupes in the inn yards. He would start a snappy ballad, get to the climax, and then pass the hat. "Just a little something for Stan, folks, if you want to hear how Willy got Emma away from the robbers before they chopped her to pieces. I know you're going to love it, folks, the way Willy did it. It's just too clever for anything."

And they knew he meant it. Stan would pass the hat and they'd fill it, or Stan wouldn't finish the ballad. And Stan's ballads were always full of juice.

Stan also went in for puppets. Hand puppets and string puppets he'd either make himself, or send box-tops for, saved from Crunchy Munchies or Cornies or

Happy-i-os, or whatever it was they had for breakfast food back around 1908. Whenever Stan could sneak time away from school or ploughing corn or milking cows, he'd practice working his puppets in front of a mirror, and he got so good at it it really looked as though his puppets had life in them. Also he wrote his own plays. And in addition he took up singing and dancing.

But Stan never overlooked a good money-making bet that was non-dramatic either. Much as he said he deplored selling magazines, he begged his father's Model T evenings and went around from door to door selling *The Ladies Home Fairy Tale Book* and *The Woman's Home Gossip* and the *Country Dame* and *Farm and Market News*. He also got pop, hot dog, ice-cream, and popcorn concessions at all fairs, football games and Kiwanis picnics in Rosner County.

When he got to high school, Stan had such big athletic shoulders, the football coach tried to grab him for the team. But Stanley told the coach he didn't have time to go out for football because he had to get back to the farm and work after school. He told his father, though, that he thought he'd go out for football and stay for practice after school. That gave Stanley the car so that he could add Filler Brushes and Hatkins spices and Emmons suits and dresses to his line of magazines and Halfproof Hosiery. It was very hard for a housewife to get rid of Stanley. If she didn't want a Filler brush or Hatkins ginger or pepper or *The Woman's Home Gossip* he would try to sell her a dress or a coat, or a pair of stockings. In fact, Stanley was to Rosner County what Haskins' General Store is

to a small town and Marshall Fields to a big one. Of course Stanley's father found out that Stanley wasn't playing football, but he was pretty fond of his son, so he didn't raise too big a fuss.

Another thing that happened to Stanley in high school had been happening all along to Stanley on a smaller scale in grade school. He not only began to look like the man you'd choose to be shipwrecked with on a desert island, but the girls also thought he was. There can be a difference.

But while Stanley could sing of love in his ballads, and pretty hot love at that, and talk of love in his puppet shows and portray love in all the high school plays in which he always got the leading roles, Stanley never let himself feel a thing for the girls who spent most of their waking hours trying to figure out how to get him out on a date. To Stanley, love was something that belonged in music or on the stage, or something you turned on and off like a faucet when you tried to sell your products from door to door and the housewife's husband had gone off on a business trip. No, siree. To Stanley, love was nothing at all that happened to the heart, but something you used to help your hands get what your head wanted. Yes, love could be mighty handy if you used it just right. Because Stanley had found out long before George H. Gallup set up his poll that women did most of the buying. And if you had anything to sell you'd better not only understand your buyer, but also understand how to get next to her.

So while nature had given Stanley all the outer trappings of love—a quarterback's body, a Lord Byron

face, and a voice that could rise up to trill like a nightingale or pour low throaty dove notes into a lady's ear, nature had also given Stanley a heart almost entirely surrounded by cartilage.

Stanley knew a great deal about his outer trappings. So much that he became a kind of authority on them. Like a dancer practising glissades or pirouettes before a mirror, Stanley practised before a mirror just how to enter a room so as to attract the attention of every woman in it, how to lift a dark eyebrow so that it had a special meaning for the opposite sex, how to bank your dark eyes with coals so that they could smoulder for a whole evening, how to stare at a woman so that her hands and feet turned to ice and the hot blood went pumping up into her cheeks and heart.

Everybody thought that when Stanley graduated from high school, he would go to Broadway, or at least into business or to some big flashy college like Harvard or Yale. But he surprised them all and went to Rosner College right there in Casper City. For Stanley had a soft streak in him after all. He was not only tied to his family, but tied to the land as hard and fast as any Irishman—the farm on which he had been born, Rosner County, Casper City, which had furnished him his first audiences. And Stanley was so used to working his way, he kept right on doing it through college, at the same time paying for his older sister Juanita's way, and his younger brother Frankie's way —Frankie who was desperately trying to follow in the Seven League Boots of his elder brother.

Stanley Blaire was one of the biggest things that ever hit Rosner College. He not only played all the

leading roles in all the college plays, but he also wrote them and got notices as far north as Detroit. He also had a dance orchestra that played all the nearby towns. And his puppet shows were driving Tony Sarg out of practically all Lower Michigan. So it is not surprising that when Stanley graduated, they offered him an instructorship in the department of speech.

What is a little surprising is that Stanley took it. I think at first he regarded it merely as a stop-gap between Michigan and Broadway. For he began to spend his summers in New York, trying to crash The Stage. But somehow he never seemed to get anywhere. Summer is a poor time to crash the stage. Furthermore, he met plenty of women, but not the right ones to get him next to the people that counted. Also he would always end up so homesick for Rosner County, he would go back to his berth in the college.

He finally went back to Rosner County for good, and continued to do just what he had been doing for most of his life—playing in orchestras, giving puppet shows, reciting ballads in addition to his work at the school. He sent some of his ballads off to a music house in Chicago and some of them clicked. Never sensationally, but enough to keep Stanley plugging on, bright-eyed. Stanley also took a few little fliers on the stock market and came out pretty well. For Stanley had found out that college teaching can be a nice safe home base for a whole lot of other activities that are not quite so safe.

Stanley had just gotten all his brothers and sisters through college and started to buy his father a new farm, when the First World War caught up with him.

Stanley took his guitar to war with him, and beguiled many men in the trenches. He also beguiled many women in Paris when he was on leave. But he came back as heart-free as he had gone, and also with his handsome face unscathed.

By this time Stanley Blaire was twenty-seven years of age and he began to look at himself appraisingly. He was still only a college professor in a small, very unimportant college, and he still had his father's new farm to pay for. He still had his handsome face, figure and voice, but he wouldn't have them for ever. And miracles didn't happen unless you went out and made them happen.

Stanley went out and tried to make them happen. He thought he had whipped his homesickness for good, so he borrowed money and kept going to fancy resorts in the East or taking trips to Europe until he bagged an heiress. It didn't matter to Stanley that his heiress was ugly and that she was ten years older than he was, and that she had been married three times before. What did matter was that she was an orphan and held her money in her own right so that he would not have to kow-tow to papa and mamma to get at it. It also mattered that she promised to back him in a play on Broadway. So he went to live with Lucille in her palace in Connecticut until he could take up quarters in New York.

Lucille was really in love with Stanley, in a selfish, possessive way. He was the only one of her four husbands she was willing to have a child for. But by this time he was so sick of twenty-four rooms in Connecticut and the East in general, he hitch-hiked back to

Rosner County. He got his old job back at the college and his old room back on the farm and commuted between the two with his father's car.

Lucille made several dashing tours out to the Middle West to get him back. She even stayed on the farm for one solid week to see if she loved Stanley enough to live in Rosner County. But she finally went back to her castle. Not without making periodic and equally futile trips back to make him change his mind. She never did get him to change it either about the East or about her. But she never gave up hoping.

By the time Stanley came back to Rosner County for good he was in a bad depression, and so was the country. He had followed all the known formulas for getting himself ahead, and they had failed miserably. For the first time in his life he had lost confidence in himself.

It was about this time that Ellen Hoyt came to teach at Rosner College. Ellen was a university graduate, but still young and starry-eyed. She was also beautiful and intelligent. Like nine-tenths of the female population of Rosner County, she fell in love with Stanley the first time she saw him; but unlike the rest of them she tried a different approach. She didn't try to attract Stanley with her gorgeous legs or her handsome eyes or her provocative bust. She tried to attract Stanley by seeking to understand him. This was an old tack too. But Ellen had some histrionic ability herself and she gave it a few new twists.

She began her campaign by stepping into his classroom the first day of the second week of school. She waited until all the students had gone and walked up to his desk. "I happened to be passing by in the hall

and I heard you reading that passage from *Midsummer Night's Dream* so beautifully I couldn't resist stepping in. I hope you don't mind. You ought to be on the stage, you know. You're wasting your time around here."

Two years before, such words would have been merely water-bugs skimming on the top of the deep pool that was Stanley Blaire. But on that particular September day they hit Stanley. Besides, he didn't know it then, but he was looking at a woman who had even more brains, determination and guts than he had. And she wasn't in a depression. Not yet, at least.

"Thank you, Miss—Miss——"

"Hoyt," she supplied. And had the good sense not to flutter her eyelashes. "I'm the new speech teacher here." Already she had a sixth sense about him, and she was straining it to the utmost. "I—I've got no right to be saying this, but you—you're unhappy about something." The blood stained her pink satin cheeks and her breath almost failed her, but she made herself keep on. "And I think I know what it is."

For once Stanley forgot all about making his left eyebrow lift properly. "What is it, Miss Hoyt?"

"Ellen," she said, the blood beating even higher in her cheeks. "I hate Miss Hoyt."

"It's a beautiful name, Ellen," he said. And found to his astonishment that he meant it.

"You're unhappy, Professor Blaire, because what you want out of life is to see your name on stage bills —great big stage bills and at the same time live in Rosner County. And so far you haven't been able to reconcile the two."

"Can anybody reconcile the two, Miss Hoy—Ellen?"

"Yes, I think so, Mr. Blaire. Theoretically, at least."

"Stanley. The name is Stanley. And I don't believe you, Ellen. Doing that even theoretically would take Aladdin and his wonderful lamp."

"It wouldn't even take Aladdin and a flashlight, Stanley," said Ellen. "You could do it all by yourself."

"Why don't you eat lunch with me this noon and tell me how, Ellen?"

"I'd love to, Stanley."

When noon came, Stanley took Ellen in the family Ford, and they drove over to a little road-house just outside of Hackett City for lunch because Stanley was still a married man, and Rosner College was strict about those things although it still regarded Stanley as one of their most talented teachers.

Over two tuna fish sandwiches and two bottles of beer, Ellen gave Stanley the information he had brought her out there to get. "There's a little dramatic bastard in the world today known as radio and it's going to grow and grow and maybe even get bigger than Broadway."

"How could it ever get bigger than Broadway?"

"The movies got bigger than Broadway, didn't they?"

"Maybe you're right. But I still don't see what all this has to do with me and Rosner County."

"Because you could have the first radio station around here if you wanted. I've checked up on it and nobody else in Rosner County has started one yet."

"Sure, Ellen. Just start up a radio station with no money and no talent, just like that."

"There's a way, maybe, of getting money and talent, Stanley. Not very much money and not very much talent, with the exception of yourself. But you're unusually good, Stan. All you need is a start."

"Forget about borrowing from the First National Bank of Casper City, Ellen. I already owe them a thousand dollars."

"It needn't take a cent of your money. To start, I mean."

"Draw me a blue print."

"Rosner College. That's all the blue-print you need. You go in and tell President Waddingham you've got a red hot idea that'll put him and the college on the map. He can put in radio and Rosner can be the first college in Michigan to have it."

"Look, Ellen. Stanley Blaire may owe the First National Bank of Casper City one thousand dollars, but Rosner College owes the First National Bank a whole lot more."

"Stanley, Stanley, that nature should give you such a beautiful body and such beautiful brains, and you should use them so little."

That nettled Stanley, exactly as she had meant it to. "Okay, okay, so I don't know any of the answers, teacher. Suppose you give us the master plan."

"In words of one syllable. You tell President Waddingham he can not only have the glory of being the first college president to put in radio, but the first college president to make money at it. The students can supply the talent, and the Casper City business men can supply the funds."

"Look, honey, the stock market crashed awhile back, remember? The business men around here are as short of cash as Rosner College."

"I love it when you call me honey, Stanley. Sure money's tight, and that's just why radio can't miss. Because as finances go down, high-pressure salesmanship has to go up. And radio can be high-pressure salesmanship."

"College radio?"

"Why not?"

Stanley took a very reflective bite out of his tuna fish sandwich. "You've got a very interesting little idea there, Ellen. You really have. But President Waddingham will never see it that way. He was born so shortly after the firing on Fort Sumter, he's never even heard of radio. He's still trying to absorb the idea of trains and motor cars."

"Mrs. Waddingham will. She was born before the firing on Fort Sumter; but she's heard of you. I saw her looking at you that day she had the tea for the new faculty members the first week of school."

"So how do I get at Mrs. Waddingham?"

"Stanley, Stanley, that such brains and such beauty should have fallen into such decay. You ask Waddingham if you can come out to his house some night and talk over something big for the school. And since it concerns selling and since women are the greatest buyers in the land, you'd like to have his wife in on it too."

"But I still don't see how he could swing it, Ellen, Radio takes towers and equipment."

"North Hall has a tower with a big roomy attic

under it. I know because I've looked. And you could buy equipment by hire purchase. I know because I've checked."

It was hard work, but Ellen finally talked Stanley into carrying out all the major parts of her plan. He won over President Waddingham through Mrs. Waddingham. He canvassed the business men of the town and squeezed out widow's mites with big promises. He bought some equipment on a shoe string and set it up in the attic of North Hall. Stanley and Ellen spent their days and nights training students to sing, play, and portray drama over WHIZ. Stanley also spent his days and nights singing ballads, playing his guitar, and giving self-written dramatic shows over WHIZ in which he and Ellen starred.

It was a long, slow, discouraging haul at first. With President Waddingham constantly getting cold feet and giving them to Stanley, and Ellen having to warm both pairs up again. But at last the pennies started trickling in on a business and not a charity basis. And pretty soon the equipment got paid for, and the school started making money. For itself, of course. Not for Stanley.

Then one night Ellen outlined the next step. For Stanley, that is. Not for the school. "It's time you got your salary raised, Stan— You've been working night and day."

"So have you, Ellen."

"Let's forget about me. Go on in and see President Waddingham about you."

"And if he refuses to give me more money?"

"Then we take it up from there."

President Waddingham hemmed and hawed and said Stanley was the most valuable man Rosner had ever had on the faculty and raised Stan's salary ten dollars a month.

"Shame on you for taking it," said Ellen, when Stan told her about it. "You walk right back and tell him you're sorry, but you made a bad mistake. Tell him you won't settle for less than a hundred dollars a month for a raise."

"I won't get it, Ellen."

"Then we'll figure out something else."

Of course, President Waddingham refused, so Ellen figured out something else. Stanley went in and tried to resign. But Waddingham wouldn't let him. He said Stan had signed a contract, and he would hold him to it.

"There's still a way," said Ellen. "Take me for a ride in your car, and I'll tell you about it."

So Stan and Ellen got into the car, and it was a beautiful warm spring night. Stan drove Ellen to the edge of their favourite little lake, where they sometimes went to talk over plans. Frogs were singing madrigals and last year's cat-tails were reaching long, reedy fingers down into the molten quicksilver that was water under the moon, and pines cast black silk shadows over them and scarves of mist rose up with fireflies for spangles.

"What's your plan, Ellen?"

"Please walk with me on the sand a little and I—I—maybe I'll get the courage to tell it to you."

So he took her hand and for the first time in all those months he noticed that it was a very nice hand and that she was just as high as his heart, the way all the

heroines are in all the corny dramas, but he thought at the same time it was still a very nice way for a woman to be. He noticed, too, that her violet eyes were black in the moonlight and very big and mysterious, and that her inky hair was like a dusky halo around her face. He also noticed that her figure was slim and willowy and her bosoms just right, and he was very particular about bosoms. Tonight for the first time it struck him that Shakespeare's Rosalind and Dante's Beatrice and all the other beautiful women in romance must have looked like Ellen. And it also struck him that he wanted desperately to kiss her. He put his arms about her and her flesh was firm and warm and springy and yet wonderfully soft under his hands. But all of a sudden he pulled away.

"Stanley," she said softly. "Put your arms back around me again. I—I'm in love with you."

"I know it, darling. And I'm in love with you. That's why I can't. I've gone and ruined my life by marrying Lucille."

"Almost, Stanley, but not quite. You're afraid to trust yourself, and I don't want you to trust yourself. That's part of the plan, darling. President Waddingham won't fire you, because you're too valuable to the school. But he'd have to, if you and I carried on."

"But I won't have you carrying on, Ellen. You're the first woman I've ever felt anything for, and I'm not going to cover you with mud."

"It wouldn't be mud, darling. It would be what I've wanted since the first time I looked at you. I'd love every minute of it."

"You'll lose your job, and I'll lose my job and I'll drag you down and then where'll you be?"

"No, darling, you won't drag me down. Because you're going to make the most money and be the most powerful man in Rosner County, and you're going to share all that with me."

In the end, of course, he gave in to her. Because he wanted to more than anything else on earth. He learned a lot of things that night. He learned that hot blood could beat so hard through your body that it could tear away the cartilage around your heart. And he also learned that the name Ellen, when you whisper it over and over close to a beautiful face is like the sound of little silver bells.

When at last they were ready to leave their favourite little lake, Ellen put a tremulous hand on his arm. "Are you sure you're willing to go through with it, darling—the plan, I mean? It won't be easy, you know."

He tilted back his Greek coin head and gave a full, happy, rich, deep laugh. "Darling, it's too late for that now. We've already put the plan in motion. And I'm so damned glad I could sing and dance right here on the sand."

It was the following autumn that Ellen's pregnancy began to be noticeable, and President Waddingham asked her to resign. And when Stanley stepped up and said he was the father of Ellen's coming child, the president had to ask for his resignation, too. Which brought up the question of WHIZ, because there would be nobody left to run it.

The president solved that by attempting to run

WHIZ himself. But he just didn't have the touch. And neither did anybody else in the school. So Rosner College found itself with some expensive equipment on its hands, and a lot of disgruntled business men.

At this point, Stanley stepped up and offered to take the equipment off the president's hands. "I'll not only pay you for your equipment in instalments with interest, but I'll even give you rent for your tower and attic. And you can still have an outlet for student talents."

President Waddingham cleared his throat a couple of times. But he finally gave in. Debts were debts and you couldn't be too fussy about morals.

In the meantime, Stanley took Ellen to live with him at the farm. His mother cried, and his father thundered, but they both loved Stanley very much and they both finally gave in. Then they both fell in love with Ellen, and after her baby came they thought it was the sweetest little boy they had ever seen. Ellen became to them Stanley's true wife and his son their true grandson. And Ellen's radiance and beauty became a tradition in Rosner County.

With Ellen at his side, Stanley built WHIZ into a financial success. It was heart-breakingly slow at first because many business men shied away. After all, Casper City was a small Mid-Western town, and they thought Stanley and Ellen had done a very shocking thing. Also money was painfully tight in the thirties, as all of us know. But when they saw WHIZ could go right on making money for them in a depression, they forgot about Mrs. Grundy.

Furthermore, WHIZ proved to be located in a peculiarly strategic spot. It was mid-way between the

powerful radio stations of Chicago and Detroit so that they cancelled each other out in a war of static. The only station which came in consistently clear as a bell in Rosner County was WHIZ. It even came in clear in thunderstorms. All of which helped WHIZ to sell dry goods, jewellery, groceries, peaches and corn.

As soon as he could, Stanley removed WHIZ from Rosner College to the First National Bank building down town, where he put a tower on the roof and an office on the fifth floor. He still used student talent and he still donated time to the college, but he was the boss now and not President Waddingham.

Stanley branched out with more and more local business deals and more and more national programmes, and Ellen branched out with two more children. They both begged Lucille to give Stanley a divorce, but she wouldn't. The more they pleaded, the more grimly she hung on, just for spite.

Even with all of her children, Ellen continued to help Stanley with his station. And she insisted on a down-to-earth quality that showed she understood Rosner County now better than Stan. Stan had gotten more arty as the years passed, but not Ellen. "Don't turn it down because it sounds corney, Stan," she would say. "The people around here are mostly farmers and orchard men and hunters and fishers and that's what they want." So that's why WHIZ had such programmes as "Strictly Full of Soy Beans" and "Ossie's Orchard" and "The Farm News and Home Hour," and "Hunting with Happy" and "Bill and Jill, the Michigan Folks in Michigan Folk Songs."

The chief reason for Ellen's down-to-earth quality

was that as her children started to grow up her conscience began to bother her. Badly. "Oh, Stanley, Stanley, I love you better than anything on earth, but this is a terrible thing we've done to our children. Lucille will never divorce you and we can never give them legitimacy. So we'll have to give them money, Stanley. Money isn't everything, but it can go pretty far. And we have to give them everything we can."

But when she saw the spasms of pain that crossed Stanley's face, she stopped saying it. She only thought it and pushed him on to making more and more money.

Ellen was the one who finally got Stan to set up a station in nearby Shelby. In the end, Shelby paid off as well as Casper City, and Stanley became just what Ellen dreamed of his becoming. He became the richest, most influential man in Rosner City, the man who could wring dollars out of the depression.

When Stanley's father and mother died, Ellen and Stanley continued to live on the farm. But they turned the old stone house into one of the loveliest places around. "I want my children to have a nice home, if they can't have a nice name," Ellen said to herself. And Ellen became so in love with her house and her sons, she gradually relinquished her radio activities at WHIZ and over at Shelby, and left them to Stanley.

For some reason or other, Stanley never redecorated the radio station down at WHIZ. Whether he thought it might over-awe the business men he served, or whether Ellen was so busy channelling money into the home and stockpiling it for the boys no one could ever figure out.

Ellen and Stanley began to have a theory about their

two radio stations. In order to put themselves on the same basis as their listeners, they did not want to get too well acquainted with their talent. Ellen was constantly listening to programmes at home, and Stanley, when he was down at WHIZ, seldom sat in on programmes any more. He would withdraw to his private office and listen to his employees as voices, and try to judge them solely on that basis.

That was why we so seldom caught sight of the big boss and why it was such a shock to me when Wilbur told me one day Stanley wanted to see me in his office. I went in through the ground-glass door in fear and trembling, somehow expecting to be fired.

Stanley Blaire was in his late fifties that November morning when I approached his polished walnut desk. But he was still handsome.

One thing about Stanley Blaire. He put me completely at ease. "Please sit down, Mrs. Taylor." I couldn't help thinking his voice was still a beautiful lute on which he still played with skill. "No doubt my asking you to come in here is a bit of a surprise. But Ellen—my—my wife, has been listening to you and she likes your voice, and she's heard the story about how your husband had to go to war the day your baby was born. She wondered whether you would have dinner with us some evening."

After all those years he hasn't yet learned to say Ellen, my wife, without a quiver in his voice, I thought. "Thank you, Mr. Blaire. I—I'd love to." I had hard work keeping out of my own voice the fact that his invitation had knocked me breathless."

"Good. Is next Friday all right?"

"Next Friday is fine."

"And one other thing, Mrs. Taylor. Bring your son along."

"Thank you, Mr. Blaire. I—I'd love to," I said, still so overwhelmed I repeated myself like a moron.

I don't know exactly what I expected the night I packed Johnny into the car and drove out to the Blaire farm. I didn't suppose stone fences and gabled roofs could be quite so quaint on the outside, and on the inside cobblestone fireplaces and Oriental rugs and walnut and cherry furniture could look so much like pictures in a woman's magazine and still be so comfortable.

Ellen Hoyt was even lovelier than I had imagined her to be. Her hair was silver now instead of black, but silver can look charming with enormous violet eyes.

Yes, Ellen Hoyt was still beautiful and like her husband, she was gracious and kind, and she made me feel completely at home. And she had two violet-eyed sons and a dark-eyed one who could have sat for Sir Joshua Reynolds.

We talked of many things in the yellow shine of candlelight that fell on Venetian lace and Spode china and then on the rosy glow of snapping logs in a fireplace that sent shadows pirouetting across Persian rugs and burnished walnut. The war, the future of radio, college teaching, Keats, Shelley, Shakespeare, the future of America. The talk was free and good that evening, and I'm sure my hosts enjoyed it as much as I did, while the three beautiful boys played with Johnny.

But when I said good-bye to Ellen in the hall, she clung to me with tears in her beautiful eyes. "Please

come again. This—this is the first time I've really talked to a woman I thought could be my friend in the last twenty years. You—you will be my friend, won't you?"

"Yes, Ellen, I will be proud to be your friend."

She smiled at me then. But there was still in her violet eyes that sadness which comes when a woman has found love but at the same time knows she has paid a terrible price.

Chapter Nine

MINNIE AND MOLLY

THE "Over the Back Fence With Aunt Minnie and Aunt Molly" programme, "originated and featured exclusively over radio station WHIZ," was part of the corn that Stanley came to deplore and Ellen insisted on keeping.

Aunt Minnie was a woman of fifty, who had a high-pitched twang like a tinny ukelele, and Aunt Molly was her daughter, a woman of thirty who had a hare lip and a hiss to her voice like a frustrated snake. Both of them were round and fat from eating the cakes and pies they made from the recipes they gave over the radio, and they both wore high lace shoes and sacks for dresses. Also they both murdered the English language as though nouns and verbs were victims in an Erle Stanley Gardner whodunit. Only when I first laid eyes on them, Aunt Molly was a little rounder and fatter than Aunt Minnie. Because Aunt Molly was going to have a baby. Or maybe twins or quintuplets.

Aunt Minnie and Aunt Molly gave a real nice homey programme three times a week, folks, with none of them fussy fol-de-rols you get on city programmes like Chicago and New York, no-o-o ma'am. Aunt Minnie and Aunt Molly gave you only what you wanted to hear over the back fence when you were chewin' the fat with your neighbours. Recipes that'd make your

man hang on to you for dear life. Home hints that'd take the kinks out of your back and put 'em in your sofy springs, ha, ha. And—well, folks, some gals may call it gossip, but we call it news. Not stale, uninteresting news like what you'll find in the newspapers these days (Bill Deal always gloated over this dig at the *Sentinel*). Stuff like what them senators is doin' in Washington, or where Mrs. Roosevelt is goin' on her latest trip. No siree, this is the kind of news where you get the real low down on Casper City, like who's havin' Sewin' Club this week and servin' cookies from Sanders Grocery Store, and what people is slip-coverin' their easy chairs with cree-tone from Jay's Notions and Nicknacks, and who is havin' a funeral this week and buying Fisher Flowers.

As you may have gathered by now, the programme was sponsored by a conglomeration of business men. All exclusively from Casper City, of course.

Aunt Minnie and Aunt Molly usually gave their programme in dialogue form so that by the time you were ready to scream at the rasp in Aunt Minnie's tin-can vibretto, you were given relief in the form of Aunt Molly's shrill sibilation.

Here is an example:

AUNT MINNIE: You orta see what I seen this afternoon at Bob Bevins' Drug Store, Molly. The cutest line of baby rattles ever came to Casper City. Got some kind of sand or somepin inside 'em that makes 'em rattle. Re-e-el cute.

AUNT MOLLY: You don't say, Minnie.

AUNT MINNIE: And that ain't all. Bob's havin' a special sale on castor oil. Some pre-war stuff he hap-

pened to locate. If a body needs castor oil, he better drop around to Bob's and snap it up quick.

AUNT MOLLY: That's right, Min. You can't never go wrong with nothin' down to Bob's.

AUNT MINNIE: Another thing they was given out with down to Bob's when I dropped around was Bob's latest pomes. For you folks that don't know about Bob and his pomes, Bob is Casper City's A Number One Poet.

AUNT MOLLY: Yes, ma-a-am. Ain't a word in the English language Bob can't find to rhyme with somethin' else.

AUNT MINNIE: Here's Bob's latest. I think it's good as anythin' Eddie Guest ever wrote, myself:

When the frost is on the punkin'
  And the punkin's in the pie
An' the pie is in the oven
  That just suits you an' I.

For the house is full of sweet smells
  Takes us as far back as we can remember
Punkin' Pie an' Thanksgiving—
  Wal, now, that's November.

AUNT MOLLY: Gee, Minnie, that's sure good, ain't it? Looks as though Bob has beat his own record on that one. An' that's goin' some.

AUNT MINNIE: Yes, ma-a-am, that's goin' some. And if you want my receipt for a really good punkin' pie that'll smell up the whole house the way Bob says and even please your mother-in-law, here goes, folks.

Gather round and scratch on your scratch pads, folks. Yum, yum.

AUNT MOLLY: Yum yum yourself. I had a piece last night, folks, and this is re-e-elly good. (Elaborate smacking lips sound effects.)

Yum yum was Molly's and Minnie's password. Never a recipe flung out over the air without a mouth-filling, heart-warming *yum yum*.

When Aunt Minnie and Aunt Molly started out on "Over the Back Fence with Aunt Minnie and Aunt Molly" ten years before, they had been two fairly timid housewives. In fact, they had only two virtues. They were known as the best cooks in Casper City and they saved up home hints by clipping them out of magazines, newspapers and books, the way a squirrel gathers nuts. The night Wilbur's car broke down in a snowstorm and he took refuge in Aunt Minnie's house at the edge of town, both of the girls had five big scrap-books apiece full of home hints, and each one of them (the girls, I mean) talked about home hints and "receipts" all of the time.

Wilbur was more or less unimpressed by the home hints, but he fell head over heels in love with Aunt Minnie's pie. It was apple that night made from a "receipt" that had been handed down in the Jasper family for years, yes ma-a-am. And when Aunt Molly dropped over with a coupla jam tarts she had just tossed off to fill in the time, just to taste, maw, to see if my luck is still holdin', Wilbur's stomach got so thrilled his brain got the idea of putting Molly and Minnie on the air with their "receipts." Just ten

minutes at first, to see how they would go over. And when Wilbur gave Bill Deal a couple of their pies to sample, Bill thought they would go over, too.

The girls balked at first. They said they'd rather die'n go on the air. They'd be so scared they'd put on their coat and pant, ha, ha. But they really meant it. It wasn't no laughing matter.

Wilbur got them to try, anyway. And they went over because, like Athena sprung full-grown from the brain of Zeus, they automatically had a big radio audience their first time out, since they were known far and wide for their "receipts."

Wilbur told me that when they first went on the air they worried all the time about their performance. "Oh, *please,* Mr. Slemmons, tell me right to my face how I done. I wouldn't want you shouldn't tell me the truth."

But as the days passed and nobody pelted them with rocks and questions about their "receipts" started trickling in, they gradually lost their pristine humility. It was replaced by a smugness which grew and grew until it resembled the elaborate proportions of their waistlines.

"You try to be too high-toned, honey," Aunt Molly hissed at me in a patronising tone the first week I was down at WHIZ. "Why don't you quit bein' so high-falutin' and get re-e-el homey stuff in your programs like Minnie and me?"

Then Minnie came in for the kill. "We been around here for a long time now and we get some mighty nice fan mail. More'n anybody else, so we're just trying to help you out. You use such high-toned words, a body can't see what you're drivin' at."

I gulped down my irritation and managed somehow to stay friendly with the girls, even though I got awfully tired of being told, week after week, that I was too high-toned.

As fall deepened into winter, Aunt Minnie and Aunt Molly kept the airlanes buzzing with snappy bulletins on the progress of Aunt Molly's pregnancy.

AUNT MINNIE: A little bird told me somebody was makin' baby clothes she's going ta be needin' reel soon.

AUNT MOLLY: Now, Min, you hadn't ought to speak about such stuff over the air.

AUNT MINNIE: Why not? It's what you'd come right out with over the back fence, ain't it?

AUNT MOLLY: Guess it is, Min.

AUNT MINNIE: Well, if it's good enough for the back fence, it's good enough for the "Back Fence" program. When you expectin', Molly?

AUNT MOLLY: Doc Pearson says not for another three weeks, yet, but if you ask me, any day now. I got such a kickin' and a poundin' inside me, I wonder sometimes if I ain't got a mule in there by mistake.

AUNT MINNIE: Gee whiz, Molly, you'd better not let Clem hear you talkin' like that. Ha, ha. He might take it personal. Ha, ha.

AUNT MOLLY: Shame on you, Aunt Minnie. You better not let anybody hear *you* talkin' like that. Stanley Blaire might kick you right off the airwaves. Or maybe the Hayes office. But anyhow I got the best baby receipt I dug up the other day. Yum, yum. Baby's pudding, it's called. Brewed up a batch of it last night and sat right down and ate the whole thing myself.

AUNT MINNIE: Don't be so stingy, Molly. Give us all the low down. And then I'll give you a hint on how to wash diapers so white you'll need smoked glasses to hang 'em up on the line an' get 'em off again.

AUNT MOLLY: All right, here goes for baby's pudding. Yum, yum.

When at last Molly grew so huge she could hardly get through the door of the broadcasting room, Wilbur called me into his cubby-hole one afternoon. "Don't know who's going to take Molly's place when she goes to the hospital. Got any ideas?"

"Yes, Wilbur," I said. "I've got a wonderful idea. Close down the 'Over the Back Fence with Aunt Minnie and Aunt Molly' program for three weeks and give your customers a well-earned rest. Give 'em either canned music or just plain silence for a half-hour and I'll bet the fan mail will roll in so fast you'll never dare ask Min and Moll back again unless it's under police escort."

Wilbur polished his already polished dome. "Guess you don't like Minnie and Molly much. But they do make wonderful pie."

"For my money thay make wonderful messes over the airlanes, too."

Wilbur got the same look in his face as Winnie the Pooh did when he couldn't locate his honey. "Couldn't get Minnie to quit anyway, even for three weeks. She's been broadcasting three times a week for the last ten years, and she intends to go on that way for the next ten years, Molly or no Molly."

"Couldn't you get Minnie to have a baby, too?"

"Huh ugh," said Wilbur. "Twenty years too late."

"You could always shoot her with your Winchester, Wilbur. Look at the way you got that bear."

Wilbur fiddled with his pure buffalo-horn pen-knife. "Been wondering if you'd mind going on with Minnie. Just for a week or two until Moll gets back from the hospital."

"Look, Wilbur, I love you and WHIZ dearly, but not quite that much. Besides, Minnie wouldn't have me on a bet. I'm too high-falutin'."

Wilbur gave a deep sigh. "Maybe you're right. About Minnie not having you, that is. Well, I'll have to think of something else. Trouble is, I've been thinking all night."

Wilbur thought some more the next night, and the night after that, and still came forth with nothing. So he told Minnie he guessed he'd let the programme go off the air until Molly got back.

But just as he had anticipated, Minnie wouldn't go off the air. "Shucks, Wilbur, I can go on with the program all by myself. I just wouldn't know what to do with myself at home all day Monday, Wednesday, and Friday any more. I'm so used to coming down here."

The worst of it was Wilbur couldn't get Molly off the air either. "I got the most wonderful idea, Wilbur," she said. "Most of the neighbors been sayin' to me, whyn't you go right on with the program up in the hospital? It'd be so interestin', listenin' to you havin' the baby. So I think that's just what I'll do. I'm healthy as a horse havin' babies anyhow. Stayed home

for the last two, but there's no reason why I can't go right on broadcastin' with this one."

For once Wilbur was speechless. All he could do was stand there and polish his pink dome. Then he began to smile like the Mona Lisa.

Once, years before, Wilbur had had theatrical aspirations. In the Casper City High School and in Rosner College he had dreamed of playing such roles as Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and Orlando in *As You Like It*, and Christian in *Cyrano de Bergerac*. And Wilbur had the voice for them. But both in high school and in college, Wilbur had about the same *embonpoint* as he had as programme director of WHIZ. So what he got were the roles of Falstaff in *First Henry IV*, and Sir Toby Belch in *Twelfth Night*, and Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Bobadil in *Every Man in his Humour*.

Wilbur attacked such roles with precision and realism, but his heart wasn't in them. So when he graduated from college, he turned to the business field and got a job as undertaker's assistant in Fletcher's Funeral Home. His heart wasn't in embalming, either, even though he gave the job the same precision and realism as he had given to his dramatic assignments.

Wilbur never did become any good at all at the actual embalming. But he did become superb at staging funerals. Something about funerals captured the dramatic in Wilbur, and he gave them lighting effects and histrionic flourishes nobody else in town had ever thought of.

It was Wilbur who thought of having Rhodella Jones dance at her mother's funeral, and Bob Bovins

recite his own poetry at his father's funeral. And when Ed Naughton, the town's Civil War veteran, was buried, Wilbur had the American Legion re-enact the Battle of Gettysburg at the cemetery and fire off the Civil War cannon borrowed from the Court House grounds. It got so that a Fletcher funeral, with Wilbur at the helm, was such a fine dramatic performance, it attracted more people than a circus. With the result that Wilbur finally bought out the ineffective Fletcher and became fairly prosperous.

Staging funerals allayed, but could not entirely quench the thirst that Wilbur had for the stage. Wilbur might have had a too-plump torso and a telegraphic style in daily conversation, but he still dreamed of the roll and cadence of Shakespearian sentences in romantic roles as uttered by Wilbur Slemmons.

Then came radio to the land, that form of dramatic art in which one could hear the actor, but could not see him. Wilbur thought of his nice low voice and wondered if he couldn't click somewhere with it. He went to Chicago, New York, and San Francisco to try it out on the big networks. But when he failed to arouse even a glimmer of interest, he returned to Fletcher's Funeral Home and tried to forget dramatics.

But when Stanley Blaire started up WHIZ, Wilbur started up his aspirations again. He offered Stanley all the money Fletcher's Funeral Home could spare and more, too, if Stanley would put him on the air. And Stanley was shrewd enough to see that Wilbur had ability hidden beneath that Mount Everest of flesh. He gave Wilbur a programme or two. And finally, when

Wilbur sold Fletcher's Funeral Home at a big profit and gave Stanley the money to help him gamble on the new radio station in Shelby, Stanley was so grateful he made Wilbur programme director of WHIZ. For life.

And Wilbur wasn't bad at it. Because he brought to WHIZ even more energy and originality than he had brought to Fletcher's Funeral Home, even though of late his interest in eating had tended to crowd out some of his dramatic ambitions. But the early Wilbur had not a few successes to his credit, as a guider of programmes. He was the one who thought of "Creeps," the programme depicting the history of the bad men of Michigan, with as much blood and thunder as "Inner Sanctum." Also every Decoration Day and every Fourth of July, Wilbur had his cemetery version of the "Battle of Gettysburg" put on the radio, complete with sound effects. He was also the one who thought of a "Lost and Found" and "Trading Post" programme, with sound effects of barking dogs and mewing cats asking to please help them find their owners again, and mooing heifers asking please to help them be traded for wheat or corn.

It was that flair for the dramatic which surged up right through the layers of fat in Wilbur and came to the fore when Molly suggested she go right on broadcasting while she was having her baby. It didn't take Wilbur two minutes to see the fine dramatic possibilities in all this, complete with sound effects. So he scratched his glaciated pink dome and said, "Think you've got something there, Molly. Really do."

I never thought Stanley and Ellen would let Wilbur

late. And then there was Sam Ensign's wife, Ella. Ella Ensign was always——

WILBUR (trying to stem Doc's tide and mopping his brow with the effort): But I don't see just what all this has to do with Molly, Doc.

DOC: I'm just trying to show you women are unpredictable, Wilbur. Now you take Elvira Hotchkiss, over there on Hickory Street. She had thirteen children and every one——

WILBUR: What do you think Molly's is going to be, Doc? Twins or triplets?

DOC: How should I know, Wilbur? A lot of those new-fangled doctors think they can find out stuff like that from X-rays and listening for heart beats and all that hog-wash. The only way you can really find out is the way Nature intended, by waiting until the baby gets here to check up on whether it's one or two or five little squallers, and whether it's a boy or a girl or a couple of each. Now you take Cora Crivens, out Sylvester way. Cora——

WILBUR: How do you feel this morning, Molly? Any different from last Monday?

MOLLY: Yes, I do, Wilbur. I don't feel so hot today. I got a sore throat, and I been sneezing something dreadful. An' besides that, I got a fever and a headache. I think I'm getting a whopper of a cold.

DOC: Quit worrying, Molly. Little cold won't hurt you. Lots of women have colds when they're having children. Now you take Letty Longtree, out on the old Mallory place. Letty was a girl who——

MOLLY: Just the same, Doc, I wish you'd give me somethin' for my cold. I don't feel good.

Doc: Here's some aspirin I got down to Bob Bovins yesterday. Can't do better than take aspirin for a cold. Now you take Annie Cavins, when she was having her triplets. Annie had a cold and——

And so on and so on. Doc finally got so voluble, Wilbur had to take him off the programme before "Over the Back Fence with Aunt Minnie and Aunt Molly" became a half-hour of Gustav Dexter Pearson, M.D.

But that made things a little dangerous. Because Doc sulked and refused to come down to the station a couple of times. And what were they going to do if Aunt Mollie happened to hang around the station too long and not be able to make it to the hospital and there was no doctor around? So they compromised and gave Doc the last five minutes of "Over the Back Fence" to devote to rambling narratives concerning his extensive practice.

One morning five days later, when I went down to give my Miss Hattye programme, I had an ominous presentiment today was going to be the day for Aunt Molly. I guess Doc Pearson thought so, too, because he was right down there, hanging on to Molly's arm like a hungry mosquito. It seemed a lot of other people thought so too, because I never saw such a crowd as was down at WHIZ that morning to check up on Aunt Molly's growing girth and make new bets.

I think Aunt Minnie and Aunt Molly both kidded themselves into thinking the baby would be obliging and be born just as they were giving their usual ten o'clock "Back Fence" so that everything could be very dramatic. But Minnie and Molly got through their

same old word jamboree that morning without a single labour pain.

MINNIE: Well, I see the little stranger ain't arrived yet. Any pains yet, Molly? Doc Pearson says it's about time.

MOLLY: Sure, it's about time. Any minute now. But all I got is a headache and the usual kicking in my stomach and a breakin' out on my face Doc Pearson says is the hives. Says I've been eatin' too many of my own canned strawberries. They're mighty good, but they give you hives, Doc says, if you overeat on 'em. And that's just what I done, with my new strawberry preserve pie receipt I just found in one of the papers. Yum. Yum. Just about the best thing you ever ate, Min, hives or no hives. An' maybe you wouldn't even git hives if you only ate a pie now an' then.

MINNIE: That so? Let's hear it.

MOLLY: Get your pencils and papers out for the best treat yet, air-wave fans. Yum. Yum. My mouth is waterin' jus' thinkin' about the receipt, much less eatin' it.

And so on. Lots of receipts, plenty about hives, but no labour pains. To Doc's and Minnie's and Molly's, and I think Wilbur's utter disgust.

In fact, when I went on into the broadcasting room for my programme, the girls were heading dejectedly for the closet to get on their hats and coats to go home. And Doc was trailing them.

But when I got through with my Miss Hattye hour, the girls were still there. Talking to their fans. And looking a little bit happier, I thought. Fans always stimulated the girls.

In fact, their spirits had revived so much, they even offered to drive me home. And since it was a raw, gusty day, I gladly accepted.

Minnie drove, and her car was one of those Model T Fords you see less and less on the roads and more and more in museums. Above the thrash-machine roar of the motor, Minnie talked on and on about a new receipt for canned mulberry pie she got out to the church social last Wednesday, Doc talked on and on about his patients out Sycamore way and Goonberry Road way, and Molly talked on and on about her hives. I didn't talk because I didn't get a chance.

All at once, Molly yelled as though she had been shot. "Quick, Doc," she hissed through her hare lip. "It's a comin', It's a comin'."

Doc climbed from the back seat into the front seat, to where Molly was sitting beside Minnie, and Minnie drove as fast as a twenty-year-old Ford will go on a slippery road.

I didn't think Minnie would beat the Smith offspring to the Casper City Community Hospital, but she did. By about ten minutes and three seconds. Like the Discus Thrower hurling his discus, Doc hurled Molly into that delivery-room before you could say WHIZ.

Since Molly had Doc and Minnie and a whole hospital full of nurses and internes to help her, I walked to the nearest telephone and called Wilbur. He was so excited he stammered.

"H-Hold everything. I—I'll put a special bulletin on the air, and then I'll be right over with the microphones."

He arrived at the hospital with all kinds of equipment and a couple of boys. But not before Molly had had her baby. It wasn't twins, but a girl who weighed twelve pounds because her mother had been indulging too heartily in eating her own "receipts."

Wilbur gleefully phoned all this down to the station, and then proceeded up the hospital stairs with the boys and the equipment. Naturally I tagged along.

"What if Molly's too sick to talk?" I said to Wilbur. "Having a twelve-pound baby is quite an ordeal, even for Molly."

"Don't you worry about Molly," Wilbur was beaming. "Never yet saw the day when Molly couldn't talk. Her husband says she talked right through having the rest of her kids. So there's no reason she can't talk after having this one."

"You're undoubtedly right," I said. "Molly has the same beautiful courage and stamina the operatic heroines have who go right on singing while they're dying."

Wilbur gave me one of those deep-delving looks, as though trying to determine whether I was throwing oil-cans or orchids at Molly Smith. Then he forgot all about deep-delving because we met Doc Pearson coming down the hall.

Doc didn't look at all like the man who has just successfully delivered the most famous baby in Rosner County. Doc's pear-shaped body had a bad slump to the shoulders, and his full-moon face was almost in total eclipse.

"Hiya, Doc," Wilbur called out jovially. "Quite a day. Quite a day. Get ready to make a speech, Doc.

And where's the little lady? In just about three minutes you and she and I are all going on the air. And the baby, too, if we can get her to bawl."

Doc gulped. And then he swallowed. As though he were having trouble with his throat. Then he said sadly, "Sorry, Wilbur. I guess you'd better count me out."

This was so out of character for Garrulous Gustav that Wilbur and I both blinked. "What's the matter, Doc? Something biting you?" said Wilbur.

"Guess you'd better count Molly out, too," said Doc pensively.

"What's the matter with Molly?" asked Wilbur anxiously. "She must be pretty sick if she can't talk."

"She can still talk," said Doc evasively.

"Then what's up?" asked Wilbur.

"You can't get at her."

"Why can't I?" thundered Wilbur. "I've got the boys and the mike set-up. Which is her room?"

"Right over there," said Doc funereally. "318."

Even from where we stood, Wilbur and I could see it. "Keep out," the sign read. "Quarantine."

Doc gave a sigh that put the Melancholy Dane definitely into second class. Then he tried to gather about him the few threadbare shreds of his dignity. "It's those smart-alecky internes around here that did it. They mentioned it to Molly's husband and he kicked me off the case. But I still say it ain't measles, it's hives. From over-eating on strawberry preserves."

Chapter Ten

QUIPS AND JINGLES

It was two weeks after Molly had birthed her famous baby that Wilbur dug me up a new assignment.

Every year WHIZ put on a Happy Holidays programme at Christmas time with local merchants buying time on the air and supplying quips and jingles. "Got to send somebody out to contact the boys and get their money and you've got a car," Wilbur said. "Besides, a lot of the boys will want you to write their squibs for them and you're the only one that owns a rhyming dictionary. Want to do it for a dollar an hour plus gas? You can take your kid along and go any time you please."

"Sure, Wilbur. I'd love to."

"It's partly because you'll be good at this kind of stuff," said Wilbur. "And partly because of the voices."

"What about the voices?"

"Can't have anybody broadcasting too many programs because listeners attach a certain voice to a certain program, and can't detach it again. Given you about all the programs I can. This'll give you extra work."

It gave me extra work, all right. And a chance to meet a whole bundle of new characters.

Belinda was chained at home answering the phone, so I invited Sarah Landrau and her daughter Susie to

ride along with me. Sarah could watch Johnny while I talked to the business men. Furthermore, in spite of all her parties, Sarah was very lonely with Phil away, and I was very fond of Sarah and thought it would give her something to do.

As usual, Sarah was delighted at the prospect of meeting new people. "You know me," she giggled when I called her up on the telephone. "My ambition is to walk up the street and have everybody say hello to me."

And I'll bet they'll all be showing up later at a couple of dozen of your parties, I thought to myself.

The first person on our list was the Acme Lumber Company on Jewel Street. We no sooner started out than six-year-old Susie began to jump up and down in the car.

"Wanta cookie," said Susie.

"No cookies," said Sarah.

Repeat performance for five blocks.

Then, "Johnny wantsa cookie," said Susie. "You wouldn't be mean to a small, wee baby and not give him cookies, would you, Mamma?"

"It would be mean to give a small, wee baby cookies," countered Sarah. "His stomach couldn't stand it."

Repeat performance for four more blocks, which brought us to the Acme Lumber Company.

Sarah resolutely picked up her purse. "Marion and I have to go into this building a minute, Susie. You stay out here with Johnny."

"Won't stay out here with Johnny." Then a sly look came over Susie's Baby Snooks face, "Unless you give me a cookie."

Sarah gave a defeated sigh, and opened up the suitcase handbag she always carried around with her. "Okay. Here's a cookie."

The ghoul in Susie evaporated into the angel. "Oh, goody, Mamma. Chocklit. I knew you'd give in."

Leaving the sleeping Johnny safely barricaded in the back seat with pillows and Susie guarding over him with cookies, I went on into the Acme Lumber Company with Sarah. When we asked for the manager, one tobacco-spitting man in overalls took us to a huge, bare back room where we found another tobacco-spitting man in overalls.

Proprietor Joe Cooke drew up a couple of nail kegs. "Set down," he said, aiming an ochre stream at a spitoon that would have made a nice collector's item if one wanted a reminder of an Early American saloon.

A rapt look came into Sarah's eyes as she sat down on her nail keg and looked around the barn-like room, where war scarcities had dwarfed what must have been big piles of lumber into a mere smattering of boards and shingles. "What a wonderful place for a party. You could have square dancing all over the place and decorate the rafters with bunting. I can just see the invitations.

'Wear your jeans and we'll dance it square.
Our rafters are trimmed, but our floor is bare.'"

"Sarah," I said. "I didn't know you could rip out jingles like that."

"I can do anything when I'm thinking about a party," said Sarah.

Joe Cooke didn't like Sarah's jingles. He resented the crack about the bare floor. "Got another shipment of lumber coming in next week," he said, talking around the plug of tobacco in the middle of his mouth. "Mighty hard to get lumber these days." He began to chew and spit so defiantly that lumpy muscles stood out all over his plucked-chicken jowls.

I could see I would have to find a little balm and apply it fast if I wanted to save Joe as a Happy Holidays customer. "I wasn't around here two weeks before I found out that the Acme was one of the best lumberyards in town, Mr. Cooke. I'll bet if you haven't got boards, nobody else has got boards, either."

Joe Cooke's ruddy face began to unfold like a Van Gogh sunflower. "That's right. Anybody's in town five minutes he's heard about the Acme Lumber."

Now that the doors of Joe's geniality were thrust open I decided to walk on in. "That's just what I'm over here to see you about, Mr. Cooke. We don't want anybody to be in town two minutes without hearing about you. So how about signing up with the Happy Holidays programme again this Christmas? You know—jingles and rhymes to chord with the times."

"Maybe." Joe ruminated over his tobacco-cud with the long, rolling motions of a cow.

"Anything special you want to say this Christmas, Mr. Cooke?" I said, not at all sure yet that he wanted to say anything.

Joe shook his dapple-grey head. "Only that we wish 'um a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year (spit) an' we hope they'll come real often to the Acme

(spit) where they'll get the best of pine, oak and ash (spit). Oh, say, and you'd better tell 'em we been in the business forty years and the rest of the lumber outfits is upstarts (spit)."

I frowned a little, wondering how I was going to tell Joe it wouldn't quite do to announce over WHIZ that the rest of the lumber outfits were upstarts and that he was expecting too much of a four or five-line jingle if he thought I could get all that into it. Finally I decided a by pass was the shortest distance between two points. I began to improvise faster than Cyrano de Bergerac composing a ballade while fighting a duel.

"How's this?

'Acme not only has good boards and shingles.
It also has good Christmas jingles.
We wish you good oak, pine and cheer
Throughout the whole year,
While we repair all your nooks and ingles.'"

Joe Cooke spat impressively and said, "Sa-a-ay, that's real good. You can run that the whole week (spit), and here's your thirtee dollars (spit)."

I thanked him profusely and pocketed the thirty dollars. Then Sarah and I went back out to the car. "When he gets a little farther down on that lumber supply," remarked Sarah, "I'm going to ask him again if I can't have a party in there. It's lots bigger than a gymnasium and twice as unusual. Besides, what else can you do with a lumber-yard with no lumber?"

When we got back to the car, Johnny was still sleeping, but Susie had demolished the cookies except for

what remained on her face. "Want some candy," said Susie.

"No candy," said Sarah. "Ruin your stomach."

"Stomach likes candy," said Susie.

The candy versus the stomach argument lasted us all the way to the second customer on our list, the True Blue Drug Store, owned and operated by the famous Bob Bovins. But unfortunately, Bob had decorated the windows of the True Blue with peppermint canes and chocolate Santa Clauses.

Susie spied them at once. "Wanta go inside. Mommy stay in the car this time."

"Mommy'll do nothing of the sort," said Sarah in a loud tone of voice to hide the uncertainty in it. "You'll watch Johnny the same as last time."

"Will not," said Susie. "You don't have candy in your purse, and he's got candy in there."

Well, you've guessed it. After a few more verbal skirmishes, Sarah lost out again, and Susie followed me into the True Blue. The inside was even more unfortunate than the windows. Instead of being one of those druggy drug stores, the place was given over to candy and a huge soda-fountain and booths. Most of the booths were filled with enraptured customers tippling sodas and malted milks and making loud sucking sounds through their straws while they did it.

"Wanta chocklit soda," said Susie.

I decided that somebody ought to be firm with Susie, so I let out an emphatic "No."

In fact, it was so emphatic, it brought forth Bob Bovins. Bob turned out to be a pleasant-faced man with crew-cut grey hair and twinkly blue eyes, but he

was bad for my morale. "Now, why shouldn't that nice little girl have a nice chocolate soda?" he demanded. "We've got some of the nicest chocolate sodas in Casper City."

"I don't doubt that a bit," I replied. "All your customers seem to have fine, satisfied expressions on their faces. But Susie has just eaten one full box of marshmallow-filled, chocolate-coated cookies. I don't see how her stomach can take care of a soda, too."

"Maybe you're right," said Bob Bovins.

"No, she isn't," said Susie. "Stomach could too. Wanta chocklit soda."

I took Susie firmly by the hand and led her away from the gleaming, beckoning fountain. "We're not going to find out the hard way, Susie. We have to be out all afternoon and we don't have time for anybody to be sick."

"Won't be sick," said Susie. "Wanta chocklit soda."

She made a little song of it, a persistent song that she sang like a relentless mosquito all the time I stated my business to Bob and discussed possibilities for jingles.

The possibilities for jingles all emanated from Bob. Bob, as you already know, was the village Milton, but maybe you didn't know he had written such famous gems as the "Casper City Playground Opening Song" which starts out, "First we prayed, and then we played," and the anthem entitled "Hail to Casper City, the City of Orchards and Gardens" for the Casper City Orchard and Garden Club, which starts out, "Hail to Casper City, so neat, and sweet, and pretty," and "Rah, Yeah,

Casper City, Win, Team, Win," for the Casper City High School, which starts out, "We've written a ream on the good old team," and "True Blue, I Love You," for the True Blue Drug Store, which starts out, "True Blue, I love you." "Here's a copy to try out on your piano, shucks, don't thank me, that's nothing, hand 'em out to my customers all the time."

I thanked him anyway and suggested that with all his talent at writing poetry he would probably want to write his own Christmas jingles for the Happy Holiday programme the True Blue would undoubtedly want to give over WHIZ again this year, which ran, as he remembered, every day for the Christmas to New Year's week.

I expected Bob's blue eyes to light up, but I didn't expect them to have that fanatic gleam in them. "Oh, sure. I write a new one every year. Always a challenge to a poet, you know. I've got a couple whipped up right here in my drawer."

I will say this for Bob. The couple he had whipped in his drawer weren't a whit worse than the stanzas I had produced over at the Acme Lumber Company, and there would be many, including Bob, who would say they were a lot better.

Bob insisted on reading his new poems aloud to me, with long, impressive pauses between the lines. And at the same time Susie kept dinning her refrain, so that the recital sounded something like this:

True Blue has got
(Wanta chocklit soda.)
A whole lot

(Won't be sick.)
Of drugs inside its store.
(Wanta chocklit soda.)
It has soda fountains too
(Won't be sick.)
That're always true blue
(Wanta chocklit soda.)
But it has something more.
(Won't be sick.)
It's got a lot of good will
(Wanta chocklit soda.)
So that sick or ill
(Won't be sick.)
You're always welcome here.
(Wanta chocklit soda.)
We'll make you feel gay,
(Won't be sick.)
Medicine your pains away.
(Wanta chocklit soda.)
And give you Christmas cheer.
(Won't be sick.)

Bob's second masterpiece fitted in much more adroitly with Susie's unrelenting refrain.

Sing ho, sing hay.
(Wanta chocklit soda.)
For Christmas Day.
(Won't be sick.)
Sing Ho for New Year's too.
(Wanta chocklit soda.)
And if you don't know how to celebrate
(Won't be sick.)

Here is what you do.
(Wanta chocklit soda.)
Come to the True Blue to eat.
(Won't be sick.)
It's always a treat.
(Wanta chocklit soda.)
We always like to hear you chew.
(Won't be sick.)

I knew Bob would expect me to enrapture over his poetry, and I couldn't quite do it. So I told him I thought he would have a hard time choosing which jingle he would want to have read over WHIZ, so why didn't he choose both and double his time for only sixty dollars, and by Pegasus, it worked. He plunked down six tens before you could say Walt Whitman. But he also insisted on reading more of his poetry.

He had just toiled through the madrigal that had won him his wife, "Dear Emmy Lou, I Love You," which starts out, "Amid dandelions and roses, we'll rub our noses and wander cheek to cheek," and was half-way through the "Elegy Written on the Death of a Beloved Neighbour Who Was Carried Of by the Flu," which starts out, "Death be not so proud, and quit yelling so loud, and give us back poor Peter Zach," when Susie's refrain began to wear him down. "Don't you think we could take a chance and give that poor little thing a chocolate soda? I—er—it might keep her quiet for a minute or two."

I hated myself, but I finally gave in. "The littlest chocolate soda you can make, Mr. Bovins."

"The biggest," said Susie.

While Susie was slurping up an extremely big little soda, Bob chanted through "Here's to Pete, Our Cat, You Ought to See Him Catch a Rat" and "Here's to Prudence and Mary, Resting in Our Cemetery," and "Farewell to Dan, He Was Quite a Man," and "Goodbye to Dad, the Only Father I Have Ever Had," which won him so much fame at the funeral for his father, staged by Wilbur Slemmons. Bob Bovins, I could see, was a lyrical genius who inclined heavily toward the elegiac. That struck me as exceedingly strange in a man who smiled so often and whose eyes were so twinkling. I finally decided he was a reverse Pagliacci, who liked to cry when his heart was gay.

After Susie had finished her chocklit soda, and Bob had declaimed through "We Buried Poor Bill, Who Got a Chill," and, "In the Grave Lies Father. Who Never Got Into a Lather," I at last made my getaway.

When we got out to the car, Sarah was giving Johnny a bottle from the thermos jug, and she had thunder and lightning in her eyes. "For Pete's sake, did you have to stay all night?"

"You've never had to listen to Bob Bovins and what he can do to quatrains," I said.

"No, and I never want to," Sarah said waspishly.

"You can say that again,"

"Take me right home. You know I'm giving a bridge party tonight, and I've got to straighten out the house and bake a cake."

I thought that was going to be the last of Sarah, but she called me the next morning, just as I was leaving for one of my programmes. "I'm sorry I got so nasty yesterday. If you're going out to see the merchants

again today, I'd like to go along. It's fun, in a mouldy sort of way."

"Come on ahead. There can't be another Bob Bovins in the whole United States, much less in Casper City," I said.

That afternoon, we started out again, same cast, same setting. Only this time the first customer on our list was Frank Elezear of the Fine Cleaners.

"You stay here and watch Johnny," Sarah said to Susie, when we drew up to the low white building with "For Fine Cleaning, See the Fine Cleaners," written all over it. "I've heard so much about this Mr. Elezear's parties, I want to get a look at him."

But Susie firmly hooked her lower lip up over her top lip. "Wanta see him too."

"You're staying with Johnny."

"Wanta see Mr. 'Lezear, too."

But this time, not even cookies prevailed. So finally I said, "Let's all of us go in."

When we were ushered into Frank Elezear's inner office, we found a plump, red-faced man with a flair for well-tailored, immaculately pressed clothes. I mentioned the fact that I had called him up at Ye Olde Winde Mille Taverne to get my husband's suits out so he could go off to war, and Frank beamed and remembered me, in spite of his Bacchanalian orgies.

"I still think we should have kept your husband at home by not giving him his clothes," he twinkled. Then he reached out for Johnny and took him on his knee. "So this is the little man who was born soon after. Denny Monoghan has been telling me about him."

The Little Man cooed up at Mr. Elezear and smiled his sweetest smile. But he also chose that moment to spring a leak in his rubber pants and make a swamp out of Frank's broadcloth knee.

I snatched the Little Man away. "Oh, Mr. Elezear, I'm so sorry. It's these war-time rubber pants. They wouldn't even make a good sieve."

Frank had a betrayed, bewildered expression on his face, but he was a man of mettle. "Forget it. It doesn't make a bit of difference." Then all at once he got a gleam in his green eyes. "Sa-a-ay. The little man has just given me a wonderful idea. For advertising, you know. Always scratching around for new advertising ideas. Instead of having a man sit down on a pie and ruining his suit and having the Fine Cleaners clean it up again as good as new, the way we've been running in the papers for the last couple of weeks, we'll have a baby wet the man down and the Fine Cleaners clean him up again as good as new. Isn't that swell?"

I nodded my head as enthusiastically as I could and added that I also thought it was swell the way he took Johnny's showering.

Frank's reply was worthy of Ben Franklin. "Never a misfortune that can't be turned into a fortune, if you can just find the way."

All through this dialogue, Sarah was sitting on the edge of her chair, snapping and unsnapping the clasp of her purse. At last she could dam back her speech no longer. "Ever since I got to Casper City, I've heard about the wonderful parties you give, Mr. Elezear. I just love to give parties, too."

Frank beamed at her the way one science fiction fan greets another science fiction fan. "You do?"

"She certainly does," I said.

With shining eyes, Sarah told all about the time she gave the New Year's and the Valentine and the Hallowe'en parties, and Frank retaliated by telling about the times he gave the garden, the swimming, the progressive, and the treasure-hunt parties. The amazing thing about the two recitals was that with all their partying neither had crossed the other's path before.

It was like chiselling into granite to get back into the conversation and state my business, but after eighteen futile attempts I at last made the grade. "How about the Happy Holidays program over the radio, Mr. Elezear? Don't you want to sign up again?" I yelled above Sarah's "And here's how I mixed the Manhattans the last time I gave my last New Year's party."

Frank looked at me like someone coming back up from a long, deep dive. "Happy Holidays program? Oh, yes, Happy Holidays program. The one over WHIZ."

Sure, Frank wanted to sign up again, and sure he'd be glad to give me the thirty dollars right now, here it is, fresh out of the till, but no, he didn't want any jingles for the Fine Cleaners, never could stand jingles. Thinking of my bad afternoon listening to the output of Bob Bevins, I heaved a deep and grateful sigh. "Then I suppose maybe you're going to want a few jokes for your part of the program," I said.

Frank beamed. "Sure do. Ever hear the one about the travelling-man and the farmer's daughter? That

would make a peachy one for the program. It goes like this, see. This farmer's daughter, see, her name is Liza or Jane or something like that, see, and she doesn't know from nothin'. Well, one day this travelling-man, who is going from house to house selling vacuum-cleaners, or cream separators, or something like that, see——"

"How about Fuller brushes?" put in Sarah, who couldn't bear to be left out of a conversation for one split second.

"Sure, sure, that'd be fine. Fuller brushes would be just wonderful," boomed Frank. "Well, anyhow, this travelling salesman has been around, see, and when he lays eyes on Liza, he says, 'By God, honey, where you been all my life?' or something snappy like that, see? And then he gets her behind the barn——"

I gave another sigh, but this one was not deep and grateful. This one was deep and lugubrious. I could see by now that quips and jokes could present even greater problems than quatrains. I said it as gently as I could, but I still sounded like a schoolteacher reprimanding a Bad Boy. "I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Elezear, but I'm afraid that just won't do. In the first place, there's a rule at WHIZ, no swearing over the air. And in the second place, any joke about a travelling salesman and a farmer's daughter has a bad reputation, even if all they do is go to Sunday School together. So I guess we'll have to think up something else."

I will say this for Frank, he rallied fast, whether it was getting his knee wet or having cold water thrown on his stories. "How about a couple of riddles then? You know, the kind where if you take 'em wrong, it's

your own fault, see? Like 'What goes in hard and comes out soft?', which is chewing-gum, see?"

Why will a man who has such a really good native sense of humour as Frank fall for such rancid, unfunny stuff? I had to say again I was awfully, awfully sorry, but chewing-gum wouldn't work either. But what was I going to do?

At this precise moment, Sarah surprised me by coming to the rescue. "Why don't you make your part of the radio a kind of party, Mr. Elezear? You know, on Christmas Day, you could have an orchestra or something play a couple of snappy Christmas carols and then say the Fine Cleaners are having a big party (over the radio, that is) and they want everybody there for the big jamboree (over the radio, that is) every night for a week. And then on New Year's Eve when you have the last night for the Happy Holidays program, you could toot horns and have an orchestra or something play and you can say you're not only tooting your horn for the Fine Cleaners, but for everybody that's been listening to the Fine Cleaners' radio program the whole week through."

I'll admit this wasn't much of a rescue. It sounded like Gracie Allen, if Gracie ever happened to lower herself to plan a Christmas programme for WHIZ. But I had to admit Sarah had an embryonic idea there that was a shade better than farmers' daughters and chewing-gum.

Frank was delighted. "That's a wonderful idea, Mrs. Landrau, especially the music and horn-tooting part." He turned to me. "How about beginning and ending the whole program that way with a couple

of good plugs for the Fine Cleaners, if I give you sixty bucks?"

I was so grateful to be extricated from my dilemma, that I beamed. "Fine. I'm pretty sure that can be worked up, although I have to talk it over with Wilbur Slemmons, to be certain. If anything happens that we can't, I'll certainly see that you get your money back."

"Sure, sure," said Frank.

I thought we could now make a quick getaway, but I reckoned without Sarah. Sarah and Frank went back to discussing parties. Not only the parties they had given for the last ten years, but also the parties they intended to give in the next decade. It was only after Frank had invited Sarah and Susie and Johnny and me to three of his next parties, and Sarah had invited Frank and his wife and his three children and Johnny and me to six of her next parties, that I finally got Sarah out of the Fine Cleaners.

"What a wonderful, wonderful man," Sarah cooed on the way back to the car. "Let's hope all the rest of the merchants turn out to be as nice as he is."

Chapter Eleven

SOME BUSINESS CALLS

THE next afternoon Susie was at dancing-school, so I left Johnny with Belinda, and Sarah and I started out alone for the Farm to You Dairy. There was a lot more "Farm" than "You" in the Farm to You Dairy because we had to drive halfway out across the county to get there. We found it situated in the middle of a cornfield.

Joe Anderson, the owner of the Farm to You, couldn't have been more different from Frank Elezear if he had tried. Joe was tall and thin and hollow-chested with moustaches that must have interfered with his milk-drinking considerably. He wore soiled-cream overalls and he reeked of sour milk and antiseptics. And I'll bet he had never been to a party in his life.

Joe's conversational tones were as dismal as though he had just buried his mother. "So you want me to renew my Christmas jingles, huh? Anything'll do. I don't think the program brought me a cent of business last year, but I guess I might as well stay on as not. Here's your money."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Anderson. I'll try to write you a good jingle and send it around and let you see it."

"Might as well save yourself work and use last year's jingle. Don't do any good anyway."

His apathy was so catching I found myself yawning and saying, "Okay." But at least I wasn't so far gone that I gave him back his thirty dollars.

"He's about as lively as a hole in one of his Farm to You cheeses," said Sarah on the way out. And for once I agreed with her.

The next customer on our list gave us a little change of scenery. It was a woman, Mrs. Marybelle Hunter, who was running the Square Deal Department Store while her husband was off to war.

Marybelle was a tall, dark woman, with a figure kept professionally slim by a Hold Back Everything Square Deal Girdle and enhanced by a Fancy Fabrics Square Deal black broadcloth suit. Her trim ankles were set off by the sheerest in Square Deal hose, while her feet twinkled in Square Deal Stepper black patents. At her slim throat and wrists bangled the best in Square Deal Elegant Lady Jewels, while her jet hair shone with Rising Sun Lacquer from the Square Deal Beauty Shop.

Marybelle was definitely in favour of renewing the Square Deal's place on the WHIZ Christmas programme, but she wanted to see the jingle first. In fact she wanted to see it right now, which meant that I had to produce one right there in her chrome and red-leather office. I sweated my way through five before I finally got one to suit her.

After I had pocketed the thirty dollars for WHIZ, Marybelle began casting about for ways and means for getting thirty dollars for the Square Deal. She smiled an exceedingly vocational smile and asked us if we'd seen the perfectly luscious new holiday dresses, coats

and suits the Square Deal had just gotten in the day before yesterday. Sarah and I both said no in a totally unresistant tone of voice.

"Then you simply *must* see them," said Marybelle, who put italics into her speech the way Queen Victoria put them into her diary. "I'll show them to you *personally*."

With her ear-rings, necklace and bracelets tinkling away like Salome dancing before Herod, Marybelle escorted us out of her office and down the stairs to Coats and Suits. As she swished along the aisles, clerks and salesladies made obeisance as though royalty were passing by. And Marybelle loved it. There was no sceptre in her scarlet-nailed hands, no train on her smart business suit, but she carried her smooth, upswept black head as though she wore a crown on it.

In Coats and Suits, Marybelle showed, us at least three suits and four coats Sarah and I fell madly in love with, and over in Dresses Sarah and I gave our hearts away completely to eight or nine exquisitely cut little beauties. It wasn't a square deal at all, but Sarah finally bought two perfectly da-a-a-rling little two-piece numbers and a pair of hats to go with them and a dream of a coat. I came out with a dress and a pair of shoes, myself, even though I didn't have any adjectives to go with and no place to wear them except to Sarah's parties, which were so frequent we didn't dress up for them any more. "This is a big gyp," I said to Sarah. "We come in here to sell Marybelle thirty dollars' worth of program, and she turns around and sells us a couple of hundred dollars' worth of merchandise. Let's get out of here quick."

Marybelle laughed and tried to get us to leave by way of the jewellery counter. "I managed to get a new shipment of hammered brass and silver from New Mexico that's *simply* out of this *world,* in spite of the war shortages. And you've just *got* to step around to Purses, my dears. Only yesterday we got in tomorrow's stuff."

I seized Sarah by the arm. "Nothing doing. We're leaving for the back door by way of Heavy Underwear."

"Whew," said Sarah, as we stacked our bundles and boxes in the back seat of my car. "I can see that working for the radio is awfully hard on the pocketbook."

"The next three places won't be," I said, looking at my list. "First we go to Jeremy's Poultry and Feeds. And then we're off to the You Smash 'Em I Fix 'Em Garage and Emmett's Wholesale Meats."

Signing up Jeremy's didn't take more than five minutes. The owner was another woman. But this one was in overalls with straw in her skinned back hair. "Sure I'll subscribe again," she said, taking a straw out of her hair and picking her teeth with it. "Same jingle'll do, too. Only I want those crowing-rooster effects again Mr. Slemmons always gives us."

I didn't know anything about the crowing-rooster effects, but I assured her that if Mr. Slemmons had given them to her once, he'd give them to her again.

At the You Smash 'Em I Fix 'Em, Mr. Brummel, the manager, was a mechanically-minded man in dirty overalls, who gave us thirty dollars in a mechanical way. "Here's your money," he said, diving into his

grease-crusted cash register. "And now if you'll excuse me, I got to go on out into the country and pick up a car that's just been wrecked."

Sarah's eyes popped open like those of a doll rudely tilted into a sitting position. "Anybody hurt?"

"Didn't ask," said Mr. Brummell. "All I know's they phoned me to come and get the car, so I got to get on out there and get the car."

"How about your jingle, Mr. Brummell? Do you want a new one, or shall we use the one you had last year?"

"I don't care. I got to rush on out and get that car."

So we rushed on out too and started for Emmett's Wholesale Meats.

Emmett's lay three miles out in the country on a side road which led us through a gloomy wood. As the car agitated and convulsed and moaned and shuddered over the icy road in which tree roots rose up to bite the tyres, Sarah said, "It looks as though Emmett's isn't one bit interested in getting customers."

Evidently the pines didn't think so either because they closed in on us on either side in menacing phalanxes. I never did actually see them pick up their feet and move toward us, but I'll swear every time I shifted my eyes to the road to help the car over the tree roots, they picked up their barky shoes and grasped their hand-grenade pine cones a little tighter to take better aim. The ones that weren't doing that were locking their spiny hands around their green spears so that they could advance toward us in a unit and stab us to pieces.

"They make me feel like Arnold Von Winklereid," I said.

"They make me want to go home," wailed Sarah.

I knew Sarah was frightened because she didn't even mention a party as a reason for going home. As a matter of fact, I wanted to go home myself, but there was a very good reason why we couldn't. "I can't turn around," I said.

Then we heard it. Even with the car windows closed. The most eerie of banshee shrieks it has ever been my misfortune to hear. They would rise up like the tides of the sea and then break in a demoniac skirl that was half gurgle and half strangle.

Sarah's eyes opened so wide it looked as though her eyeballs were going to fall out of their sockets. "Did you hear that? Somebody's murdering somebody. I'm going to turn around and go home if I have to walk."

"And maybe run into the murderer leaving the scene of the crime?"

"I guess you're right. What're we going to do?"

"We're going to keep right on because we can't do anything else."

As we continued to shudder our way over the rutted roads, the pines got blacker and more menacing, and the shrieks increased in volume. Sarah began to sob. "It's a hidden German concentration camp, and they're murdering a bunch of people in a gas chamber or something. And they'll put us in there and murder us too."

"The wails aren't muffled enough for a gas chamber," I said with a courage I didn't at all feel. "And besides,

how could the Germans get a concentration camp way over here in Casper City?"

"You never can tell what those Germans are going to do," wept Sarah.

The car kept on going, so we kept on going, too, although our every instinct was to flee in the opposite direction. The shrieks kept getting louder, like some horrid carnival of ghouls, half human, half animal. Werewolves, I thought, shuddering.

All at once the wails subsided as abruptly as they had come. But the ensuing silence was not peaceful and reassuring. It was even more ominous and terrifying than the wails.

Suddenly we came to a clearing, where a long, low, dilapidated building huddled under a crazy quilt of picket fences. One of the patches of the crazy quilt was splotched with blood.

Sarah began setting up her own series of screams. So loud a man came running out. We expected him to be covered with blood, too, but he wasn't. He was covered with blue jeans and one of those coonskin coats which college boys used to wear, but which have since descended to farmers.

"Whatsa matter, lady?" he asked, shifting a briar pipe from one section of his worn-down teeth to another where there was a hole. "You scared at somethin'?"

"I should say I am," wailed Sarah. "First those awful screams and now that blood. We'd better call the police."

To our amazement, the man put back his head and laughed. "That's a good one. What do you expect when you're butchering hogs?"

"Of course," I said. "We should have known all

along that Emmett's Wholesale Meats would be a slaughter-house."

"Look," said the pipe-smoker. "You don't like shrieks and blood, you better go on back into the woods. The boss is gettin' ready to butcher a couple of cows next."

So Sarah and I went back into the woods and sat for an hour just to be sure. We took another road, but the ruts were just about as bad and the trees just about as unfriendly.

"This is the last time you get me out on one of your hare-brained deals," Sarah scolded.

"You wanted to come, remember?"

When we were quite sure the cow-killing was over we drove back through the menacing pines, by-passed the blood, and hunted up Herbert Emmett, son of Joseph Emmett, son of Charles Emmett, founder of Emmett's Wholesale Meats.

Herbert Emmett was big and brawny, but he didn't look like a sticker of pigs. He looked like a hearty, genial, slightly over-age college boy, who keeps on sticking around so he can keep on playing for good old Varsity. "Sure I want to renew the Christmas program," he said. "Emmett's Wholesale Meats was on the program when it first started and it'll keep right on until the last one."

After he had given me his money and approved the first jingle I wrote for him, he insisted on showing us through Emmett's. "It's a great institution," he said. "Better than the cereal factories any day."

"Not if we're going to see any blood," said Sarah, shuddering.

"We'll skip the blood," promised Herbert.

He did, too. We got a nice little pasteurised tour, in which Sarah and I fell in love with the sausage machine. It was such fun watching flaccid little sacks of skin blow up into pork and wiener balloons, we couldn't tear ourselves away.

"Come back any time," said Herbert, when we said we had to leave. And even Sarah promised that she would.

"Even so, I'll bet that's one place you wouldn't want to give a party in," I said to Sarah as we drove back over the ruts.

"I don't know," said Sarah, a dreamy look coming into her eyes. "You could have everybody come out in overalls and have Herbert take everybody on a tour of the place and end up at the sausage machines and eat wieners and buns. It would certainly be novel."

"It certainly would," I said.

"You kind of get used to a slaughter-house after a while," said Sarah.

"Yes, you do."

Even so, that night when I fell asleep I dreamed I was a heroine in an Agatha Christie mystery in which Sarah gave a slaughter-house party and the murderer cut up a corpse along with the pigs and then blew them all up together into sausages, so that the police were completely baffled.

Chapter Twelve

HAPPY CHRISTMAS

THE loneliest days for lonely people are holidays. That is especially true of wives with small children and absent husbands. On all other days lonely wives can spend their spare time torturing their sheets and pillowcases with French knot flowers and satin stitch leaves. They can wash the woodwork for the third or fourth time, or scrub the furniture or read books or listen to the radio. When such pursuits bore them they can whip up organdie or silk dresses on the sewing-machine that turn out good enough to wear in the kitchen, or make hats that absolutely look as good as Paris, my dear, but always feel a little funny when worn in Chicago, or Dubuque, or Casper City. Or they can win a transient fame by broadcasting on the local radio station so that when they ask for a pancake turner in the dime store or a bunch of carrots at the Casper City Super Foods, the clerk (if she's a woman) is bound to say, "Haven't I heard your voice somewhere? It's *so* familiar. Oh, yes, *I* know. *You're* the lady who broadcasts the 'For Lovely Hair and Hands, See Miss Hattye' program, *aren't* you? Say, what do you think I ought to do about my cracked fingernails?"

These things you can do quite nicely during the week, and you can even pad out Sundays with them, if you try very hard. But when Thanksgiving, Christmas,

and New Year's roll around, they just won't do. There is too much remembering what other Thanksgivings, Christmases and New Years have been like with husbands around.

Congress should have granted Sarah the Congressional Medal for trying to take the sharp edges off the Thanksgivings of half the army widows in Casper City. She invited ten women and eighteen children to her one-and-a-half room and served us chicken (turkey was too hard to get), cranberries, Postum (coffee was rationed), oleomargarine (butter was rationed) and pumpkin pudding (lard was rationed, so pie-crust was out). We had to open the windows to get enough oxygen, and the children cried and knocked over the lamps and tables and played fort in the kitchen and bathroom. But at least we weren't crying alone by ourselves.

Even so, it was with a feeling of relief that I saw two of my radio programmes loom up on Christmas and New Year's days. For in radio, of course, you keep right on broadcasting, holiday or no holiday.

Sarah was having a potluck formal Christmas party, with bingo and games for the children, and a New Year's Martini party with pop for the children. But I turned them both down to go to the radio station. And of course mother began in October to invite me home for Christmas and almost disowned me when I wrote I couldn't. Den and Belinda also invited me to spend both days with them. But at the last minute Den's brother got sick, and Den and Belinda went to Detroit.

That left me alone on Christmas Eve. After I put

Johnny to bed, such a desolated feeling came over me, I nearly pulled him out of his bed again and started for Sarah's. Then I remembered Sarah was giving a farewell party that night for her janitor, who was going off to war, and only the people in her building were invited. So I started to trim my Christmas tree instead.

Mine was a towering, obese evergreen, one of a tribe Mrs. Swatel's Yuletide Greens had donated to WHIZ and WHIZ had in turn donated to each of its employees. I feel sure Mrs. Swatel had overbought on church, railroad station and Masonic Hall numbers and didn't know how else to get rid of them. But I was still grateful for a free tree, even though it filled up Den's back porch when Wilbur delivered it.

It filled up my evening, too, getting it up Den's back stairs to my living-room. I pushed and shoved until I had needles all over the stairs and torn branches all over the handrail and scratches all over my arms. And if the back door had not been directly in line with the living-room, we would never have entered my small apartment.

The next morning, Johnny was wailing for his bottle, the Christmas Tree had fallen down flat in the living-room, and it was sleeting outside. Getting Johnny satisfied was easy. But there was absolutely nothing I could do about the sleet or the Christmas Tree.

By eleven o'clock Johnny and I started for the radio station. When we got there, the place looked deserted. But Frankie Blaire's voice was coming out over the air lanes and there was a lilt to it I had never heard before. Frankie didn't sound or look a bit like the big boss. He was short and fat and wore glasses, and he would

have made a good train conductor, if it hadn't been for Stanley. For Frankie had the kind of lower register that always sounded like "Wi-i-ildwo-o-od. Everybody out for W-i-ildwo-o-od," even when he was saying, "La-a-adies, does your fur coat look like something that has been served up at an annual moth convention? Let Fri-i-ink's Fi-i-ine Fu-u-urs fix up your coat, so it looks as goo-o-od as new. Don't dela-a-ay. See Fr-i-i-ink today."

Only this morning, Frankie was putting so many extra trills into his voice he sounded like an alarm clock. "R-R-u-un-ing out of Chr-r-ristmas cheer-r-r? Why not r-r-run over to Cr-r-rowder's for Beer-r-r? Cr-r-rowder-r-r-s Liquor-r-r Stor-r-re, wher-r-re Pr-r-rices are less and quality is mor-r-re, will be open for your convenience all Chr-r-ristmas after-r-rnoon. Don't for-r-rget. Join the Cr-r-rowd at Cr-r-rowder-r-r's."

When I wheeled John in his buggy back to the broadcasting rooms, I saw why Frankie had such a lilt to his voice. Through the window I got a full view of Frankie lifting a glass to his lips every time he paused for breath. And he paused for breath often. In a small office just beyond, Emory Wheeler, spots, farm news and a nephew of the big boss, was drinking a Scotch and soda, Wilbur (minus Maria Antoinetta for once) was drinking a Bourbon and soda. And Muriel Busby of New York, in love with Emory Wheeler, was just plain drinking.

Emory Wheeler, who was Juanita's son and the exact image of what Stanley must have been at Emory's age, was the most talented man around the radio station. He had inherited Stanley's low, intimate voice, just

made to make love, and he wrote some of the best script around the office. He could easily have made Tyrone Power step aside with his jet hair, his dark eyes and his lean, greyhound body.

Like Stanley, he belonged on the stage or in the movies, or on NBC or CBS, New York, making love to some $1,000 a week actress on an expensive Erna Phillips daytime serial. But instead Emory was an announcer on WHIZ.

And Emory hated the farm news he had to dole out. To be sure, he relayed the latest on chick feed and alfalfa in a voice that sounded as though he were infatuated with baby chicks and haystacks, but deep down in his heart he longed to make love to Claudette Colbert.

For it was the movies which drew Emory, just as Broadway had once attracted Stanley. Only Emory hadn't been handicapped like Stanley with a love for Rosner County. He left for California just as soon as he was out of the Casper City High School and following the footsteps of his illustrious uncle, married a girl whose father had stock in NGN pictures. Only Midas disinherited his daughter when she married Emory, and Emory had to go to work in a grocery store. It was a Hollywood grocery store, of course, and Emory hoped some producer would see him when he came in to buy onions. Only it didn't work out that way. So Emory got a job as a waiter in a place where producers were said to dine. Only nothing happened there, either. Except that Emory had two sets of twins in four years, and still his father-in-law didn't relent.

Juanita, of course, was frantic at her son's ill fortune, and she sent Stanley out to California to persuade

Emory to come home. Stanley did so, by offering Emory farm news and spot announcements, the only vacancies open at the time, at WHIZ. And Emory took the job as a more desirable entrée to the theatre than being a waiter or selling onions.

Stanley offered to move Gracie May and the two sets of twins back to Rosner County at his own personal expense and give them a place to live in his big house until Emory was making enough to keep them in one of his own. But Emory had his own peculiar kind of pride, and he refused. Besides, he intended to get back to California as fast as he could, and he wanted Gracie May to keep working on her father to get him a berth at NGN, and he hoped the twins might help her.

How long Gracie May and the twins were going to be able to hang on to Emory via the United States mail was a very uncertain question. Because Muriel Busby, who ran a theatrical agency in New York, had fallen for Emory. Muriel told him she was putting him on her list, and she made frequent trips to Casper City via aeroplane to consult him about it. And then she quit making excuses. If Emory would marry her, she would put him into a Broadway play, where some Hollywood talent scout would undoubtedly see him. It didn't matter that Emory had Gracie May and two sets of twins. If Emory really wanted to get ahead in theatricals, he would find a way to marry Muriel. Muriel knew, because she had already sluffed off three husbands.

In the frank daylight of Christmas morning, Muriel looked like a woman who had had time to sluff off as

many as six husbands. Muriel was still good enough by candlelight, or a 25-watt electric bulb, but natural light, short of a total eclipse, brought out the road maps in her sharp face. There was intelligence in the green eyes, and there could be humour, too, and a considerable amount of charm, but craft was so often in the ascendancy as to seem the main expression of her face. Also, there was the sheen of dye in her black hair, and a creak when she moved that showed the strain to which her corsets were put under the expensive purple suit.

Muriel was lifting a water glass of straight Scotch to her lips when I entered the room. She put it down with a jangle of bracelets and grasped Emory's arm. "Darling, you've had six months now to make up your mind," she said in an unsteady voice, totally ignoring Wilbur and me. "Why don't you marry me on New Year's? I've never been married on New Year's before."

Such a look of pain crossed Emory's handsome face. I felt sorry for him. "But you're forgetting about Gracie May. I married her four years ago on the Fourth of July. And I'm still married to her."

Muriel's lips twisted like snakes. "But you've already left her. Why don't you be kind to her and finish the deal?"

Emory shifted uneasily toward the window, and you could see the frayed cuffs and the careful darning on his coat. "I can't. Who would take care of her and the children?"

Muriel's drink was drooping her eyes and thickening her voice, but it was by no means diminishing her

craft. "Your dear father-in-law. All you have to do is leave Gracie May and really mean it, and he'll have to come to the rescue. Just see if he doesn't."

Emory got up abruptly and his hands went out in an arc of despair. "I can't do it, Muriel. He might not. And besides, I still care for Gracie May and my kids. I—I—well, I don't want to do it."

Muriel went white, and she banged down her veined fist with a clatter of bracelets. "You don't really mean that, Emory. You want to be an actor more than anything else in the world, only you just plain don't have the guts."

At this point Wilbur, plus a couple of glasses of Bourbon and soda came into the argument. "Has too got guts. Guts enough to stick to his kids. My wife ran off and left my kids, and what has she got? Kids won't speak to her when they meet her on the street. Even if she got to be Queen of England, think she'd feel any better about it?"

"Rah, yeah Wilbur," I said.

Emory reached over and took a big swallow of Wilbur's drink. "You're right, Wilbur. And there's one way I can get out of this whole damned mess and do right by everybody. I can give up my draft deferment on account of the kids and enlist in the army."

A white line came around Muriel's ox-blood lips. "You wouldn't, Emory. Not after all I've done for you."

Emory's dark eyes flashed. "What have you ever done for me, Muriel, except make promises at a very high price?" And with that he stalked out of the room. Muriel clutched at her bracelets and then she weaved after him.

Whenever one gets a job in a radio station, he sooner or later hears a story that goes something like this. A man, who calls himself Uncle George or Uncle Bob or Uncle Jim, is broadcasting a kiddies' programme called Favourite Bedtime Stories or Story Hour Time or Journey into Toyland, or something like that. He signs off the programme saying, "So that's how the elephant got his great big ears, boys and girls," or "And that's why the moon looks as though it has a piece bitten out of it, Nancy Jean and Susie and Billie and Joey and all the other dear little boys and girls who are listening to your dear old uncle." Then as Uncle George, or Uncle Bob, or Uncle Jim gets the cut-off sign from the control-room, he leans back and mops his brow and says, "Well, I guess that ought to hold the little bastards." Only the microphone isn't dead. Someone has accidentally left it open, and Uncle George's or Uncle Bob's or Uncle Jim's remark floats out over the air to greet the tender ears of all the dear little boys and girls, and—what is infinitely worse—their mothers.

Something like that happened to Muriel and Emory when they took refuge in a practice broadcasting room that Christmas morning. Emory said afterwards that he checked the mike and thought it was dead, only he was so agitated it was really open. All at once over the drone of Frankie's commercials came the strident voice of Muriel and the determined voice of Emory in a trio that sounded something like this:

FRANKIE, Dr-r-rink Cr-r-rowder's Beer-r-r for Christmas cheer-r-r-r.

EMORY: Once and for all, I'm getting a job you can't

touch, Muriel. And I'll be leaving so soon you'll never see me again.

FRANKIE, When the gang's all her-r-re, dr-r-rink Cr-r-rowder-r-r's Beer-r-r.

MURIEL: You're in love with me, Emory, and I'm going to make you rich and famous. That crazy Slemmons is wrong when he says your children mean more to you than anything else. You've got acting in your blood and you can't get it out again.

Etc. Etc.

Finally, Dan Jones who was at the controls that morning, got the montage of Muriel and Emory and Crowder's Beer off the air and canned music on instead. But there were some exceedingly bad moments before he did.

It would be nice to be able to say that at the particular moment in which Muriel and Emory put on their impassioned little scene, a talent scout happened to be listening and was so impressed with Emory that he hired him on the spot. Nothing like that happened, of course.

But somebody else was listening. Stanley, whom none of the rest knew was in his inner office. He came striding out, his handsome eyes, so like Emory's, glazed with pity and passion.

He went over to Emory and put his hand on his arm. "I heard what you said, Emory, and I'm glad you said it, even if it did have to mess up our airlanes on Christmas. I—I'm glad you're sticking with Gracie May and your children and going off to war. That way you won't louse up your life the way I did. I never could stand that Muriel, anyway. She looks too much like Lucille."

We all sat there, choked into silence. Then suddenly I heard Wilbur say, "'S about time for your program, Marion. Take a sip of this and go on in. Makes things easier."

I took the generous shot of Bourbon he handed me and drank it down. It must have had high geminating qualities because when I looked at Johnny he was twins. Also there were two Stanleys who took two Emorys into his inner office, and two Muriels, who walked haughtily, but unsteadily over to the cloak closet and took out matching mink coats and put them on and slammed out of double doors.

"What have you done to me, Wilbur?" I wailed. "I feel so woozy I can't go in there and broadcast."

"'S where you're wrong," hiccoughed Wilbur, who must have started geminating some hours back. "You'll go in there and feel like Norman Corwin croshed with Clifton Fadiman."

Wilbur was right. He took Johnny and dandled him on his knee, and I took my script and went on into the broadcasting room. There were two microphones there that morning and double words danced around on double pages, but my courage was suddenly double, too. I felt like all the great actresses rolled into one, reading the most marvellous script in the world.

"Wasn't I good, Wilbur?" I cried, when I came dancing out of the broadcasting room.

Wilbur nodded a little off keel and kept right on dandling the cooing Johnny. "You were shwell, kid, shimply shwell. You didn't even hiccough."

Chapter Thirteen

TOD'S DILEMMA

WILBUR walked me home between broadcasts, and it was sleeting so hard we had to hang on to the handle of the wicker buggy to stand up. "Johnny'sh really walking ush home," said Wilbur.

"Come on up and have bacon and eggs with me," I said, when we came to the door of my apartment. "I'm skipping the twenty-pound turkey this Christmas."

"Love eggs," said Wilbur who was losing his thickness of speech in the buffeting of the wind. "Feels like a morgue when the kids can't get home for the holidays."

"Feels like a morgue without John, too. But anyway, we can dance around my Christmas tree." Then I began to giggle. "Just wait till you see it."

It was when we got into the front hall that I heard the sound of sobbing. I ran on up the stairs and found a bedraggled heap of brown tweed and stone martens sitting on the upper landing. "Bootsy," I cried, helping the tweed and stone martens to a standing position. "Whatever is the matter?"

Words and sobs spurted in pairs out of Bootsy's luscious mouth. "It's—it's Tod. He going away and I—I can't stand it."

I led Bootsy on into my apartment, as Wilbur followed, carrying Johnny. "But how did you ever get here?"

Bootsy crumpled down on my sofa. "Tod's in love with me, I know he is. But he—he just won't marry me. And now he's going to his sister's in New Mexico, so I'm following him."

I shook my head, trying to clear it of Wilbur's drink, which was coming on me again in the heat of the apartment. "But this isn't New Mexico."

Bootsy went into a fresh rainstorm. "I—I told Tod I—I was coming over to see you because you were always so nice to me and y-you might tell me what to do about h-him, and he—he followed me here."

By now Bootsy's words were whirling my brain as badly as Wilbur's drink. "But where is Tod now?"

"In the r-railroad station," sobbed Bootsy. "Unless he—he's followed me over here."

"Since he isn't over here," said Wilbur, dandling Johnny on his knee, "he must be over in the railroad station."

I stood up, fired with resolution and Bourbon. "I'm going down to the railroad station and have it out with this Tod Burke, Wilbur. You watch Johnny."

When I got back down on the street, the world was completely glazed with transparent plastic. But I somehow made it down to the railroad station and found Tod Burke chain-smoking on a worn wooden bench.

I was shocked at his appearance. That radiant, Nordic god look was gone, and in its place were deep lines and pallor.

He tried to back away when he saw me, but I caught

at his hand. "Tod, I've only seen you once before, but I've got to know something. Why won't you marry Bootsy?"

He crushed out his cigarette as though he were grinding out a rattlesnake. "I—I just can't, that's all."

"Is it a wife and six kids?"

The lines ploughed deeper into his face. "I wish it were that simple."

"Then insanity runs in your family."

"If it did, I'd be nuts enough to go ahead and marry her."

That made me angry. "See here, Tod Burke. Bootsy is not only one of my best friends, she's one of the best-looking, most wonderful girls I know. Any day you think she isn't good enough for you——"

He gave me a savage look. "Did I say she wasn't good enough for me? God, Bootsy is so wonderful, she's too good for the best man on earth."

I still didn't know what it was all about, but I felt pity begin to come over me. "To Bootsy, you are the best man on earth, Tod."

He put his head down into his hands. Once before that Christmas morning I had seen despair—when Muriel had been harrying Emory. But Tod's despair seemed more heartbreaking. "That's why I have to go away," he said in a voice that sounded like stones grating against iron. "And God help me, I can't find the courage to do it."

I pitied him, but across my mind came the picture of Bootsy sobbing in my apartment. "There must be a reason for all this, Tod. And when anybody loves

you as much as Bootsy does, she has a right to know what it is."

He brought up his head and stared at the floor with eyes so stony they frightened me. "Once when I was in high school, my mother took me to see *Camille*. It's bad enough for a woman, but my God—for a man." His lips writhed. "And such a trite plot, too."

I saw it all then. The incurable illness, the broken career, his wish not to ruin Bootsy's life.

Tears rushed into my eyes. "Did you follow Camille and make it consumption, too?"

He shook his head. "Cancer. The doctors don't give me more than a year."

At that moment there was a flurry of little heels across the stone floor of the station. Bootsy stood before us, more beautiful than ever, even with the tears staining her face. She flung herself into Tod's arms. "Please, please don't leave me, darling. That's the one thing in life I can't stand."

"She's right, Tod," I said. "And whether you like it or not, I'm going to tell her. He's got cancer, Bootsy, and he hasn't more than a year to live. Do you still want to marry him?"

Such a look of grief came into her dark, beautiful eyes, I thought she was going to faint. Then she tightened her arms up around Tod's neck. "Yes, Tod. But whether you'll marry me or not, you can't get rid of me."

"Bootsy darling," was all he said. But his voice was choking with grief and joy.

I went away, then, and left them alone. Hours

later, they showed up at my apartment, just after Wilbur had walked me back from my second broadcast. Bootsy's eyes were glowing, and even Tod looked like a man who has found a small, precarious foothold on a steep mountainside, down which he had been sliding to his death.

She came over and clung to my hand. "We're going to get married. Tomorrow, just as soon as Tod can get a licence. Will you stand up for me?"

I put my arms around her. "I certainly will. And Wilbur will too, won't you, Wilbur?"

"Sure will," said Wilbur. "One of those things where whatever you do, you're taking a chance. So might as well choose the chance that'll make you happiest. Besides, so much being done in medicine today, there's always a chance Tod will get well."

Bootsy stayed with me that night, and Tod went home with Wilbur. Just as Bootsy and I were about to get into bed, the phone rang. Those long, determined, burring rings that signify long distance.

"It's my folks," said Bootsy ruefully. "Here it is Christmas Day, and I haven't even phoned them."

"It's John," I said, gleefully. "He's calling me from Guadalcanal, or the Phillippines, or New Guinea, or wherever it is he's fighting. Some of them are getting through now."

I went to the phone, so excited my heart was almost choking me. But it was not John's voice which leaped out at me over the wires. Neither was it the voice of Bootsy's father.

It was Keith Bainbridge, calling me from San Francisco. "I tried to get you all Christmas Eve, but the

wires were so full I couldn't get through. Will you wish me good luck? I'm about to be shipped, and it would help if you cared a little."

I thought of how poor Keith had tried to find happiness with Meta, his wife, and had failed so miserably and now there was no one to wish him farewell. "I do care, Keith," I said, my eyes filling with tears. "I wish you all the luck in the world. I only wish you were here with Den and Belinda and me, having one of our good old dinners together."

There was a long, singing drone over the wires. Then Keith's voice came again, low, insistent. "I have a few days. I could get a pass and fly to Casper City."

"But Den and Belinda are gone for the holidays."

"Den and Belinda are swell, but it's you I want to see. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, Keith, I know. But that's just why you can't."

I could feel the bitterness in his voice all the way from the coast. "Morals look a little silly on a battlefield, darling."

"Do they, Keith? I—Keith, I'm sorry. But you —you picked the wrong girl."

"I guess that's why you attract me so. I never want anything unless it's hard to get."

I came away from the phone, still crying. "Bootsy," I said, "if anyone had told me yesterday my Christmas was going to be so packed with melodrama I could hardly stand it, I wouldn't have believed them."

The next day, Tod and Bootsy were married. It is an awful thing to stand beside two people who were taking as grave a chance as Tod and Bootsy were, and

know you urged them on to do it. Several times while Bootsy was saying her "I do's" in a clear, ringing voice, and Tod was saying his in a low, choking voice, I had the impulse to run forward and cry out, "Stop it. Tod was right all along. Bootsy mustn't marry him. She *is* ruining her life."

But Bootsy's dark eyes glowed with light, and even though she still wore her tweeds and stone martens, no satin bride was more ravishing.

Even Tod had regained some of his old radiance, as he stood, straight and tall beside Bootsy. The lines and the pallor were still in his handsome face, and a haunted look flickered in his blue eyes, along with the joy. But whenever he looked at Bootsy, his face flooded with love.

Wilbur stood beside me in his best suit, which had grown too tight for him and smelled strongly of moth-balls. In his excitement, he teetered on his heels and toes like a slightly mad merry-go-round, and his bald head shone with perspiration. "Never saw a more beautiful bride," he whispered. "In fact, never saw a more handsome pair."

I nodded and smiled. Then my gaze rested on Tod. Such a beautiful body, such a fine brain, soon to be destroyed by that horrible inward thing, gnawing that beautiful flesh. Hamlet's "fatal flaw that cracks the whole."

After the wedding, Wilbur and I toasted Bootsy and Tod, until they left for the local hotel. Bootsy's eyes kindled as she told about how she planned to give up her job at the radio station and help Tod. "We're going to see to it that 'Know Your Own History' goes

all over the United States and Canada. Why, we could even take it to England."

"Don't leave out Australia and Mexico," teased Tod. "It might make 'em feel bad."

After the door had closed on the newlyweds, Wilbur cleared his throat and said he really ought to be going too. But he made no move to lift his well-upholstered body off my sofa. Instinctively, I knew he had something on his mind.

After two more glasses of sherry and a great deal of harumphing, Wilbur at last came out with it. "Like your advice about something. Maria's home visiting her mother. Wants me to marry her when she gets back."

I couldn't help it. I had to ask, "Where is her mother living now—Rome, Paris, or Singapore?"

Wilbur coloured and took a big gulp of sherry. "On a farm twenty miles from here." He swirled his glass, like a fortune-teller shaking his tea leaves. "Lived on a farm all her life and so did Maria. Until Maria ran off to Chicago and learned how to operate a switchboard."

"How about Italy, Europe, the Orient, and the houses of Valois, Bourbon and Savoy?"

The colour kept flooding up through Wilbur's face until it suffused his shiny dome. "Guess they were kind of a pipe dream."

"And poor dear Albert?"

"Never been able to figure that one out. Guess he was a pipe dream, too."

I took a long drink out of my glass of sherry. "I sound a little mean, Wilbur. But it's only because I'm

so fond of you. I know you're lonely, and you've done such a good job of bringing up your children, you deserve a little happiness. I don't know much about these things, but I think Maria's got some kind of psychological quirk, or she wouldn't lie the way she does. I—well, I feel sure there's somebody better in the world for you than Maria."

Wilbur pulled out his pocket handkerchief and blew his nose very hard. "Not young any more. And never was good-looking. Can't pick a Powers model, you know."

"But you're so darned nice, Wilbur, people can't help liking you. You're going to find Miss Right, if you just wait long enough. And her name isn't Maria Jones."

Wilbur got out his pipe and began to pull on it. "Been thinking about something else, ever since I heard Emory Wheeler talk up to Muriel the other day. I went through the First World War as a sergeant. Been thinking of going through the Second World War as a re-tread."

"Do you have to take such drastic steps, Wilbur?"

"Been thinking about it for some time. When you've been in one war, you'd kind of like to help out the boys with the next."

At that moment there was a rap on my front door. When I opened it, there stood Maria, snow on her worn beaver coat, her obsidian eyes searching the room for Wilbur. At her side was a man who might have served as a pattern for Mortimer Snerd, except for the Mark Twain moustaches that drooped down over his diminutive chin. He was tall and scarecrow thin,

with embarrassed eyes the colour of his faded blue jeans. His face, red as a the comb of a barnyard rooster, matched his flaming hair. But it was his Adam's apple that fascinated me. It towered above the collar of his worn plaid shirt and it jerked up and down like a puppet on a string.

Maria ran over and threw her arms around Wilbur's neck. "Darling," she said dramatically. "Where have you been? I've been looking for you all over town."

"Must've," said Wilbur, laconically. "Or you wouldn't have found me here."

Maria glared at me and pursed her crushed strawberry mouth. "Your landlady told me where you were, Wilbur. My dear, you've no idea how she watches your every move. I declare I'm positively jealous."

"Nothing to be worried about," said Wilbur, still maintaining his high colour. "Just been helping out with a wedding."

Maria tittered like an excited sparrow. "How thrilling, Wilbur. Now that you've had practice with one, why don't we turn around and have another? Because I've decided to say yes, Wilbur." She tossed a bird-wing gesture at the creature in the doorway. "I don't think it's fair to keep poor, dear George dangling any longer. He's been in love with me since he was a boy."

From the looks of poor dear George, that had been a long time and the experience had been hard on him.

"Won't you come on in and have a glass of wine?" I said to poor, dear George.

George's Adam's apple did a St. Vitus dance, and his face turned ruby red. "Thank you, ma'am. Don't

mind if I do." But he gave me a shy smile as he sat down beside me on my sofa. He's rather sweet, I thought, with a little flurry of surprise. With all his funny looks, he doesn't deserve a fate like Maria, either.

It was clear that Maria had not only conned history, but steeped herself in romantic novels as well. She turned to both of the men and said, "I know one of you has got to be heartbroken, but I can't marry both of you. I'm sorry, George, but it has got to be Wilbur."

"Wouldn't want you to disappoint George," said Wilbur.

"Don't mind me," said George. "You go right ahead and marry Wilbur."

Maria bit her lips so hard the squashed strawberries came off on her teeth. "Don't tell me both of you are going to walk out of my life," she shrieked.

Wilbur took rocking-horse steps over to her side, and his voice was manly and gentle, both at the same time. "Look, Maria. I never did ask you to marry me. You're the one that asked me, remember? We've had some good times together, but I think that's as far as it should go. It's fairer to have it out now, than to mess up both our lives. I'm sorry, Maria."

"Me, too," said George. "'Sides, I got ma to look out for. And you know ma. She never could abide another female in the house. And we'd have to live with ma."

Maria's whole face got mottled, and her eyes rolled, like basilisks. "I'll make you sorry. Both of you. I'll kill myself, that's what I'll do." And with that she dashed on downstairs and slammed out the door.

Wilbur mopped the top of his head, and then started

hunting around for his coat. "Better go after her. Upset like that, can't tell what she'll do."

"It would be better if you'd let her go, Wilbur," I argued. "She isn't really the type to commit suicide. She expects you to follow her, like in chapter eighteen of cloak and dagger novels."

Wilbur went on buttoning up his coat. "Better see, anyhow. Couldn't stand it if she did do something." And he went on out, leaving me with George.

George made no move to play the hero. He went right on relaxing on my sofa. "Maria's been actin' like that ever since she was knee high. Readin' books kinda touched her up in the head."

"I think you're right. But tell me one thing, George. Who was this poor dear Albert she was married to?"

"Maria married? Only one she ever run around with at home was me. An' I never went so far as to ask her to marry me."

"But there is usually some basis for the myths people like that make up about themselves. Think back a little. She said this man was a dealer in antiques, and he had been all over the world."

George's Adam's apple hovered in mid-air and then all at once it began to do a gavotte. "Sa-a-ay, I betcha I know. I ain't travelled much further than Cass and Miller counties, but I been in the hides and junk business since I was seventeen. And my middle name's Albert."

Chapter Fourteen

ELIZABETHAN HOUR

I NEVER knew quite how Wilbur did it. But he somehow managed to get Maria off his trail. Not only that, but she also quit her job at WHIZ and took a book-keeping job at Emmett's Wholesale Meats because Herbert Emmett offered her more money. And also because she found out he was a widower. "One thing about Maria," said Sarah. "When those awful pines out there bite her, she'll bite right back."

Wilbur also made good his promise to join the army. And he didn't try to play the romantic hero. "Government took me because they're short of barrels," he went around telling everybody. Of course, we all went down to the station to see him off. And to cover up his emotions, he kept right on wise-cracking. "Me leaving for the army, makes a much bigger hole than when Emory left. Much bigger man." Then, as if that wasn't enough, he added, "Army's not only getting a re-tread. It's getting the whole tyre."

Having thus knocked himself out verbally, he kissed us all good-bye. When he got around to me, I gave him an extra hug. "Take care of yourself, Wilbur. I don't believe I could stand it if anything happened to you."

"Thanks, honey," he said. And there was a glint of tears in his eyes.

It was hard enough on Bill Deal when Emory left. But after we all saw Wilbur off, Bill went around the office like a ghost trying to find a house to haunt. "Wilbur's not the only one who went through the First World War," Bill would grumble. "I ended up staying overtime on the Rhine, and they could overlook things and take me again, if they wanted to."

"Not with a leaky heart," I said. "Cheer up, Bill. There's plenty to do on the home front."

"Yeah," said Bill, squashing out his cigarette as though it were a Jap. "Knitting."

It was the next day that Ellen phoned to invite Johnny and me out to dinner. I had seen quite a bit of her and Stanley that winter, and the more I saw of them, the more eagerly I looked forward to seeing them again.

Of course, there were people who warned me against Ellen. Even Belinda Monoghan, who was so kind in every other way. "I know you're lonesome, poor thing," Belinda said to me. "But running around with that—that woman is no good. You come down here when you don't know what to do with yourself."

"I do, Belinda," I replied, wondering why it is always the woman who is blamed in an affair like that. "I —I know you mean it for the best, but I—I'm not going to stop going out there when they invite me."

Belinda sniffed. "Okay. I just wanted you to know how Casper City feels about her. She—— She's got a bad reputation."

I didn't argue any further. I just packed up Johnny in the car and drove out to the Blaire's. And as usual,

Ellen greeted me as though I were a delicious cake, which she wanted to devour all at once. She was alone with the children because Stanley was over at Shelby.

After the usual good food, which Ellen had prepared herself, she asked me, "Ever done any college radio?"

I nodded. "Some. Both writing and directing."

"Good," replied Ellen. "Then I think I have a little job for you."

Rapidly she sketched her dilemma. WHIZ still had a hookup with Rosner College in the form of a few student programmes and spot announcements. And one of the programmes needed doctoring. "Have you ever listened to the 'Elizabethan Hour'?" Ellen asked.

I blushed and shook my head. "It always comes at one of Johnny's feeding times, and I somehow never get it turned on."

"You're just as well off," laughed Ellen.

"The Elizabethan Hour," Ellen went on to tell me, was the root, stem, and branch of one Persis Crowe, spinster, scholar, and professor of English at Rosner College. Ellen asked me to listen to the programme a couple of times, and then go out to Rosner and see what I could do to doctor it up. "That won't be easy because it involves dealing with Persis. Frankly, the rest of us have tried to reform Persis and failed. But there's no harm in trying once more. I'd appreciate it if you'd at least go out and talk with her."

The Elizabethans were a lusty people, but there was no lustiness about the "Elizabethan Hour." In fact, it was a very dry vine. So dry I choked when I listened to it.

And yet I must say in its own way "The Elizabethan Hour" was unique. It was the first programme I ever listened to in which footnotes were dramatised along with the lives of poets.

Here is an example:

BEN JONSON: What ho, my man, give us a light. Is this not Drummond of Hawthornden I see before me?

VOICE OF PERSIS CROWE: See *Encyclopædia Britannica,* "William Drummond (1585–1648)", Vol. 7, p. 680. One should definitely not miss reading this exciting article. Also one should see Drummond's Poems, with *Cypresse Grove,* the *History,* and a few minor tracts, collected in 1656 and edited by Edward Phillipps, Milton's nephew, for a better understanding of the Scotch poet. The *Works of William Drummond, of Hawthornden* (1711), edited by Bishop Sage and Thomas Ruddiman, contains a life by the former, and some of the poet's letters. I quote from the *Encyclopædia Britannica,* "William Drummond (1585–1649)", Vol. 8, p. 600. "In the winter of 1618–19, Drummond had included Ben Jonson in his circle of literary friends, and at Christmas 1618 was honoured with a visit of a fortnight or more from the dramatist. The account of their conversations, long supposed to be lost, was discovered in the Advocate's library, Edinburgh, by David Laing, and was edited for the Shakespeare Society in 1842.

DRUMMOND OF HAWTHORNDEN: Aye, indeed. It is none other than William Drummond himself, welcoming ye to Hawthornden. Welcome, welcome, royal Ben.

BEN JONSON: Thankee, thankee, Hawthornden.

VOICE OF PERSIS CROWE: One must note that the publication by the Shakespeare Society in 1842 of what was obviously intended merely for a private journal has given Jonson an undeserved reputation for harsh judgments, and has cast blame on Drummond for blackening his guest's memory, as see *Ibid.* and the following dialogue.

DRUMMOND OF HAWTHORNDEN: Ah, ye are a breath of life to Scotland, arriving from London as ye are. But tell me, what think ye of this man Shakespeare, of which one hears so much?

VOICE OF PERSIS CROWE: One should again see *Ibid.,* and also Extracts from the Hawthornden Mss. preserved in the Library of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, printed by David Laing in *Archæologia Scotica*, Vol. IV.

BEN JONSON: This Shakespeare, they tell me is a swift writer. So swift that he has never blotted a line. Would that he had blotted a thousand.

And so forth. And so forth. And *Ibid.* I listened to "The Elizabethan Hour" three nights in a row and Persis never deviated from her formula: one-fourth dialogue and three-fourths footnotes. It's striking at first, but after the first fifteen minutes you become drowsy. And after the next fifteen, you're snoring. I was convinced that the only thing to do with "The Elizabethan Hour" was to cut it off the air entirely, but I had promised Ellen to see what I could do. So I left Johnny with Belinda and went out to see Persis Crowe.

I'm very fond of colleges, and I have been in quite a number of them. But Rosner was as sorry-looking a

sight as I have seen. The campus consisted of a small plot of mangy grass and two streaked brick buildings that sagged worse than Pisa's Leaning Tower. Inside the Civil War structures, the worn steps had half-moons, and the dark halls had yellowed statues of *Athena* and *Artemis* and Cellini's *Perseus,* and water-stained photographs of all the Rosner graduates from 1865 to 1942 on the dirty walls.

I found Miss Persis in her combination office, classroom, and theatre, in which there were rows and rows of books and rows and rows of desks and three or four busts of Shakespeare. Persis was seated like a queen on a throne at a battered oak desk on a raised platform.

Persis had a knife-thin face with a Richard III expression, a chin that stuck out like Lady Macbeth's, and a body like that of Starveling, the tailor, in *Midsummer Night's Dream.* She wore a rusty black serge dress, and her grey-brown locks stuck out like Ophelia's in the mad scene. The only thing that didn't look Elizabethan about her was her pince-nez glasses. They teetered down somewhere near the end of her devious, Malvolio nose.

I introduced myself and then made the mistake of telling Miss Persis I had been listening to her programme. She glowed like the fire under the cauldron of Macbeth's three witches. "Have you? How thrilling. One is always so interested to meet one's radio audience face to face. That is one of one's troubles with radio, don't you think? The thing that made the Elizabethan Age so great, that fine *rapport* between audience and actor is lost in radio. One is at such a disadvantage, hearing and not seeing, isn't one?"

I almost said, "But one can sometimes be at a great advantage, hearing and not seeing, too, can't one? Especially if one is listening to the 'Elizabethan Hour'." But I didn't. I murmured something about how right she was about the fine, old *rapport*.

Like Richard II, Persis was definitely in love with the sound of her own voice. "One finds the Elizabethans so thrilling, doesn't one? I declare, one never knows which dramatist to take next, one finds them all so exciting. And then there are the poets like Sir Philip Sidney and lovely Edmund Spenser and wonderful Christopher Marlowe, and——"

At this point I entered Persis' monologue by brute force. "Have you ever thought of just giving scenes from the plays themselves, without commenting on them? There are so many works to draw from, you could go on endlessly. Or you could give some of the five-act plays in the form of a continued story."

Persis looked at me like Goneril driving Lear out into the storm. "No, no. Impossible. If one's programme is going to do anything for one, one must have it teach something."

"But wouldn't it be teaching to give your audience a direct knowledge of the plays you're discussing? A college usually has a few capable actors around. Why can't the plays of Shakespeare be made as fascinating over the radio as they were at the Globe?"

Persis gave me what she hoped was a Portia smile. "Ah, how refreshing it is for one to find someone from the outside who knows that Shakespeare's plays were given at the Globe. One doesn't know how many people in this world don't know that Shakespeare's

out his will in their favour. This goes on until Mosca, who wants Volpone's money himself, gives out the news that his master is dead and he, Mosca, is the heir. I planned to have the way in which Volpone is extracted from his dilemma coincide with Persis' return, so she would have to go on with the play. Maybe, just maybe, she would finish it without footnotes.

I not only got to coach the "Elizabethan Hour," I also got to take over Persis' classes. It was Ellen, I think, who tipped the president off to the fact that I had once taught Shakespeare myself. We had a fine time, Persis' classes and I. I even let them in on a big secret I so seldom divulge. I told them I had written a scholarly article on Shakespeare once myself and got it published in the *Publications of the Shakespeare Society of American Scholars*. I even gave them the volume and page.

I had fun with the "Elizabethan Hour," too. There weren't many men students at Rosner, but it was surprising how well some of the girl's voices sounded when they read the parts of the avaricious old men in *Volpone*. We even began to get some fan mail. Not much. But what there was sounded sincere and enthusiastic.

I saved it up religiously. I was even low enough to get some of my friends to write in.

Miss Persis returned from the Shakespeare Society of American Scholars in a "Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this son of York" mood. The Richard III look had almost lifted from her sparse face. And she came back with dozens and dozens of footnotes.

I handed her classes back to her without a murmur. But I hung around for the first rehearsal of the "Elizabethan Hour."

Persis began by giving her student actors a pep talk. "One can't imagine what a lift one gets from going to something wonderful like the Shakespeare Society of American Scholars. Just think of it children, getting to stand next to Joseph Hart Brambaught, while I was in line for a drink at the drinking fountain. And I talked, I actually talked to William Davis Owen when I dropped my handkerchief, and he picked it up for me."

Yes, Persis was in a gay mood. But not so gay she was willing to go on with *Volpone*. She turned on me with an angry glare. "I told you before how I feel about plays. So we're discontinuing this silly performance. Besides, I've come back with barrels and barrels of footnotes I know my audience is going to eat up."

I argued with her. I even showed her the fan mail. But I got exactly nowhere.

I finally left, but not without speaking my mind. I told Persis that she had as fine a group of student actors as I had seen anywhere, but that she was drowning them with footnotes. I told her that her listeners were drowning in footnotes, too. Then I picked up my hat and coat and walked out.

I was down at the kerb, still berating myself that all I had accomplished was to send Persis off to Chicago so that she had more footnotes than ever, when I heard the sound of someone running. I looked up from unlocking my car and saw, to my utter amazement,

that it was Persis. Her hair was more mad-Ophelia than ever. But she had a smile on her thin face. An ecstatic smile, which her laboured breathing could not quench.

"Yoo-hoo," called Persis. "Don't run away. One makes mistakes sometimes. But one can at least admit them. I—I've decided to go on with *Volpone*. Without footnotes."

My face got ecstatic too. "Oh, Miss Crowe, that's wonderful. Ellen will be so pleased," I blurted out.

I could see, of course, she didn't know what I meant. But that didn't keep her from talking. "Not only that, but I think I'll go on with more plays. And I wondered if you'd help me with them. One usually finds two heads are better than one, doesn't one?"

That left me breathless. Then curiosity made me ask, "Would you mind telling me, Miss Crowe, why you suddenly had this change of heart?"

Persis shivered. But it wasn't from the cold. It was from delight. "One of the students just told me you had written a scholarly article once and got it published—and in the *Publications of the Shakespeare Society of American Scholars*."

Chapter Fifteen

THE PADILLAS

SOMEHOW the days and the seasons ambled along. Winter thawed into spring, and spring rejoiced with warm sunshine and soft breezes and then shattered into green leaves and anemones and purple violets. Loss was still there, poignant and persistent, loss of John, loss of mother, yes, and loss of Wilbur, of whom I had become so fond in a remote sort of way, and loss of Keith, whose brave last deeds on a far-off Pacific battlefield had earned the Congressional medal and were in all the newspapers. But new friends were coming, too. And among these were the Padillas.

The Padillas, as you may have guessed from the name, were Spanish, and Belinda told me about them as possible baby-sitters for those nights when I might want to go out with my friends, and she had to go to Bridge Club. Juan Antonio Padilla and his family lived a half-block down the street in a little house built in the backyard of a big house, as was so often the custom in Casper City. The Padilla house had been originally neither a dog nor a doll house, but it combined features of both. It was exceedingly small, and it had a rounded, swinging front door, whose origin I was never able to determine, but which seemed to me must once have borne the inscription "Fido".

Juan Antonio had been born in Castile, and he spoke some of the most polished, perfumed English it has ever been my privilege to hear. He was short, but he was well-formed and handsome with hair the colour of highly-polished mahogany and eyes the colour of sherry. After reading about Cortez and the rest of the conquistadores in history books and novels, I had come to the conclusion that Spaniards were reckless, arrogant, and cruel. But Juan Antonio was cautious, humble, and so kind that he had chosen the profession of male nurse in a nearby sanitorium in order to help mankind.

Juan Antonio spoiled his pretty, plump wife Maria, and babied his fifteen-year-old daughter, Louisa Teresa, and his twelve-year-old son, Bartolome. Maria had been the daughter of wealthy Mexicans, and, when she eloped with the newly arrived, impecunious Juan Antonio, her family had cut her off. Juan Antonio felt so contrite about the foreign country and the straitened circumstances into which he had taken his beloved Maria that he washed all the clothes, cleaned the house, and did the dishes after he got home from work late at night. In Juan Antonio Padilla all traces of the Spanish Inquisitors had been so utterly purged, there was nothing left but tenderness and gentleness.

Maria was likely to erupt into volleys of machine-gun Spanish, but she was as kind as Juan Antonio. "What, you have infante left by father to go off to war? You breeng heem here any time. Maria weel look after."

And now that Eloise was married and Wilbur gone away, and Bill Deal doing three people's work, I let

Maria look after Johnny during morning and afternoon programmes when Belinda was busy.

But evenings it was different. Then, when I wanted to go out, I put Johnny to bed in my apartment, and waited for Luisa Teresa Padilla, who was wild to earn extra money, and whose mother would not let her go out of the neighbourhood to earn it. Maria wouldn't let her daughter go out alone at night, either, so Maria always accompanied Luisa to my doorstep, well-guarded by Bartolome, who came along to escort his mother home, so *she* wouldn't have to be out alone at night.

But Maria would not allow Luisa Teresa to sit alone in my house after ten o'clock for fear someone might break in and seduce her. So promptly at one minute after ten Bartolome and his mother would return to substitute Bartolome for Luisa Teresa.

Bartolome was tall and fat, and any time I arrived home between ten and eleven, I found him stretched out on my davenport, reading comic books. If I stayed out longer, I would find that Maria and Luisa had arrived to relieve Bartolome, who was the youngest, and therefore should be in bed. Maria and Luisa Teresa stayed until eleven-thirty, at which time Juan Antonio arrived home from work and took over, sending his wife and daughter home to bed. That was why whenever I stayed out until midnight, I found tired-looking Juan Antonio, the last of the four Padillo baby-sitters, sitting in my easy chair.

"I hope and trust madame has had a most enjoyable evening," Juan would always greet me in his impeccable English English.

"Yes, Juan, I did, thank you. But you look so weary you ought to be home in bed. I feel guilty keeping you up."

"Madame has sent husband to war to help us all. The least thing Juan can do is help Madame take care of brave soldier's baby."

His courtesy and kindness never failed to move me. "Thank you, Juan," I would reply, close to tears.

"It is nothing, Madame. Besides, my Luisa she, loves to baby sit."

At six-thirty the next morning, I would have a wild-eyed Bartolome hammering at my door. Because Bartolome invariably forgot his pile of comic books and left them on my davenport, woke up in the middle of the night and remembered them, could not sleep the rest of the night worrying about them, and came over for them the minute he heard the milkman making his rounds.

"Got the best bunch of comics in Casper City," Bartolome would always say when I handed him his pile of dog-eared, paper-backed books. "Don't know what I'd do if I ever lost one of them."

One night I got home at midnight to find all the Padillas still there. Black-eyed Luisa was singing Spanish songs in a lush soprano voice, and Bartolome had come out of his comic books long enough to accompany her on a pearl-handled guitar. I have heard a lot of singing in my time, but I have never listened to a voice clearer, or higher, or sweeter than this fifteen-year-old girl's.

"Luisa," I said. "Why didn't you tell me you could sing like that?"

Luisa's cheeks flushed with pretty, pink pleasure. "I don't know. I just like to sing, so I sing."

"Maria, she help," said Juan, so proud he lapsed a little in his English. "Maria, she once sing like nightingale. Only cold climate get her in throat."

Maria's black eyes were soft and warm on his. "No, no, Juan. Just say your Maria once seeng, but she never seeng like your Luisa."

I was so proud of discovering my Spanish songbird, I could hardly wait to get down to the radio station and tell Bill Deal about her. "I didn't say a word to the Padillas about this," I told Bill, "because if you can't find a spot for her, I don't want her disappointed. But you've never heard such singing."

Bill hadn't either, when I brought Luisa down and had her try out for him. "Remember when I promised that old son of a gun Jenkins down at the Jewel Casket that I'd send Lily Pons around the first time she showed up at WHIZ, looking for work? Well, Lily Pons has showed up, looking for work. I don't know what I'm going to tell the Raven, but we're signing up Lily Pons, as of now."

The Raven was Bill's name for a superannuated dowager who hung around the radio station and whose singing voice had died a long time ago. Mary Garden was smart enough to retire when she reached her peak, and so did Geraldine Farrar, and some others. But not Matilda Bender Howe-Smith.

For one thing Matilda never reached a peak, and for another, she had struggled so hard to get anywhere at all, that she would never give up the inch or two she had gained. The inch or two was the berth Matilda

had in the First Presbyterian Church, financially stabilised by her rich husband, Joseph P. McEldowney Howe-Smith, and her singing assignments at the Casper City Country Club, also financially stabilized by Joseph P. McEldowney Howe-Smith. Casper City and Joseph P. had long ago lost faith in Mattie's creaking coloratura, but not Mattie. And Mattie ruled Joseph P. and Joseph P. ruled Casper City, so there you were.

Mattie's tie-in with radio was that she had made Joseph P. offer Stanley Blaire such a fabulous amount of money to put her on WHIZ that Stanley just couldn't turn it down. Or at least Ellen wouldn't let him. So every morning at six-thirty, Mattie went on the air in a programme of the worst singing ever to be heard anywhere. Mattie belonged to the tremolo school of warblers, and her favourite numbers were "Oh, Prom-om-om-ise Me-e-e" and "Little Grey Ho-o-ome in the We-e-est," and "Drink to Me Ho-o-o-only With Thine Eyeyeyes," and "Loo--o-ok Where My Lo-o-ove Lies Dream-eam-eaming," which she did over and over. Stanley figured that Mattie would do less damage at six-thirty than at any other hour in the day, and he also hoped originally that the early hour would ultimately discourage Mattie. But it never did. In fact, about all that happened was that Mattie usually hung around for the rest of the day, ordering first Wilbur and then Bill to take her with them to hunt for new programmes. They were careful to take her only to those places where they knew the sponsors could not tolerate musical programmes. But they lived in constant fear that Mattie would make Joseph P. buy her another radio programme.

"Poe was wrong about that 'Croaked the Raven nevermore' stuff," was the way Bill put it. "With Mattie it's 'Croaked the Raven evermore.' What somebody ought to do is croak the Raven, period."

Bill was very careful to sneak Luisa into the studios for her first try-out when he knew Mattie was down practising at the First Presbyterian Church. And within ten minutes he had signed Luisa up with Jenkins down at the Jewel Casket and Karl Van Oosterhout down at Warm Companion Furnaces. Karl, who had never been known to go in for art of any kind. "That Luisa girl. She's kind of got something you can't resist," Karl told Bill.

The Padillas were very proud of Luisa, and they were even prouder when Bill signed up Bartolome to accompany his sister on the guitar. And they were very grateful for the money. But since the Padilla children had to be scheduled largely for evening programmes because they were in school most of the day, the Padillas went through the same sort of schedule they did while baby-sitting for me. Mamma would accompany the children down to the radio station and then wait until Papa could get off from work and accompany them all home. Also Bartolome never went out on a programme that he didn't take his pile of comic books along. "Always got ten or fifteen minutes when I'm not doing anything," he told me. "Why should I waste my time, when I can be reading about Superman?"

Of course, it was inevitable that Matilda should hear about Luisa and the two should clash. Or rather that Matilda should clash because Luisa was too sweet

to clash with anybody. And so were Juan and Maria.

Mattie began by attacking Bill Deal. She advanced on him with blood in her eye, both of her chins shimmying, and her Grand Canyon bosom full of earthquakes. "What do you mean, Mr. Deal, by letting that—that snip of a girl have the singing programs that rightfully belong to me?"

Firecrackers popped in Bill's eyes. "She's not a snip of a girl. She's one of the nicest little ladies that ever came into these studios. And she can sing like nobody's business. Besides, whoever said they were your programs?"

"Nobody's business is right. Nobody has a right to put her in business, that's what. She ought to be in school."

"She is in school," Bill fired back at her. "She only sings evenings."

"That's what I mean," shrieked Matilda. "She ought to be in bed."

"That's for her parents to decide, isn't it?"

"I'm going to see the Humane Society."

"Don't get Luisa mixed up with dogs and cats."

"Why not?"

But seeing that she was getting nowhere with Bill, Matilda took her blood in her eye, her double chins, and her Grand Canyon bosoms and advanced on Luisa, who had just come in with me to practise for one of her programmes. "What do you mean, trying to take my place around here?" Mattie bellowed.

Poor little Luisa was thunderstruck. "But I didn't know I was taking your place. I thought——"

"You thought right, honey," said Bill, putting his

arm around Luisa's shoulder. "If any of those sponsors of yours had wanted Mattie in the first place, they could have had her any time in the last twenty-five years."

Mattie was so furious, she pounded out of the room like a steam-engine.

"Just because she's got Kate Smith's form is no reason she can sing like Kate," Bill said after her retreating back.

"She may get you fired for this, Bill," I said.

"It'll be worth it."

Sure enough, Mattie thundered into Stanley's office. And for once, Stanley was there. We never knew exactly what went on behind the ground-glass door, but when Mattie came out, she was still red in the face.

Naturally Mattie went home to try to work on her husband, Joseph P. She commanded him to use his money-bags to buy out Luisa's programmes, so Luisa couldn't sing. But for once Joseph P. stood up to her and refused. Whereupon Mattie got so furious she chased Joseph down into the cellar and tossed an axe at him. Only the axe missed Joseph and hit a water-pipe and sprang a fountain. I know because Joseph managed to get to the phone and call the police and Den. The police took the raving Matilda to the asylum and Den repaired the fountain. We all felt sorry for Matilda and Joseph, but at least things were more peaceful after the blow-up. Even Joseph P. went around saying so.

After that, Luisa had a clear field down at WHIZ. So clear that she worked herself right out of the station. Two months after the day I first took her down to sing

for Bill, some talent scout heard her over WHIZ and signed her up for a big Chicago station. And all my Padilla baby-sitters went with her—Bartolome with all his comic books, Mamma with all her old-world fears about preserving a maiden's virginity, and Juan, who of course wouldn't let the rest of the family go off without him.

Their departure made not only a hole in my social life, but also a hole in my heart. And it also made a hole down at WHIZ.

"What am I going to do?" Bill Deal anguished to me, the day after they left. "Luisa got everybody wanting singing programs, and now there's no Luisa."

"You won't find another, either. She's as rare as a five-eyed horse. And besides, where else am I going to get four baby-sitters?"

I went on home, caught in the mesh of Bill's melancholy. When I picked up Johnny at Den's, Den looked gloomy, too. "Some friend of yours is up in your apartment, sobbin' her eyes out. Holy mither, she looked so bad, Oi didn't have the heart not to let her in with my key. Pretty as the lakes of Killarney, too. Hope Oi did the roight thing."

"Of course you did, Den." Then I took Johnny in my arms and went on upstairs.

It was Bootsy I found stretched out on my davenport, sobbing. She looked as though she had been weeping for the last three days. When I put Johnny in his play-pen and took her in my arms, her grief was so wild, she couldn't talk.

"Is it Tod?" I asked, knowing that for her sake, I must get it out of her.

She nodded, hiccoughing with sobs.

"Is he ill?"

"Dead," she said, turning the colour of old parchment. It all came out of her then, like water rushing over a broken dam. His terrible suffering. The way he reproached himself for having married her. The way he didn't even know her at the end.

"I never left his side. For the last three weeks I couldn't eat or sleep. And then when they took him to the undertaker's I couldn't bear it any more. They tried to keep me in the hospital, but I—I got away. I had to come here."

"I'm glad you did, Bootsy. You're going to eat and sleep. And then we'll see what's to be done."

She talked on incoherently, but somehow I got food inside of her. And while I was feeding and putting Johnny to bed, I saw that she had gone to sleep on my sofa.

She slept for twenty-four hours. I kept Johnny in the back part of my apartment and left her right on the davenport. In the meantime, Den and I made arrangements by long-distance for Tod's funeral.

Bootsy awoke from her long, trance-like sleep strong and refreshed. "I'm hungry," she said, and sat down at my table and ate three oranges, six poached eggs and five pieces of toast. "Now I'm ready to go back to Springfield and arrange for the funeral," she said.

"It's already arranged for, and I'm going back with you, darling. Den and Belinda will take care of Johnny while I'm gone."

I have never seen anyone braver than Bootsy. When her parents arrived, and her father reproached her

for having married a sick man in the first place, Bootsy met his protests with sweet reasonableness. She sat dry-eyed through the funeral and read Henley's *Invictus,* Tod's favourite poem, without a quiver in her beautiful plush voice.

After we got back from the cemetery and were momentarily alone in the small green and gold apartment she and Tod had shared, I put my arm around her. "What are you going to do now, Bootsy? Will you want to stay on here alone?"

"No," she said, her lips quivering for the first time during that long, hard day.

"What about Tod's radio business? Is the 'Know Your Own Town' series still going?"

Bootsy shook her black curls. "All the good men left, and we just had to give up. All I've got are my job down at the radio station and Tod's insurance."

"How would you like to work at my radio station and come and live with me? I'm sure Stanley Blaire can find you something to do."

"I'd love it," Said Bootsy.

I had to ask the other question that had so long obsessed me. "Have you ever been sorry, Bootsy, that you married Tod? I—I've felt so guilty, talking you into it."

Her great black eyes grew warm with light. "Nobody could have talked me out of it. I—I wouldn't take anything for each day I had with him. It—it's been the greatest thing in my life. He was mine completely, and in the after life he will be mine again."

"Yes, he was yours completely," I said, gently.

"I have never seen a man more in love with a woman."

Bootsy's parents did their best to persuade her to go home with them, but she refused. "I can't go back to the farm. I want to be in a town, where there is radio. No, I'm going to live with Marion, if Stanley Blaire will have me on WHIZ."

"I'm sure Stanley will be delighted," I replied.

Sure enough, Bootsy was a sensation down at WHIZ. "She can read lines like Madeleine Carroll," said Stanley. "She can sing like Luisa," said Ellen. "She looks like Venus crossed with an angel," said Bill.

Bill gave Bootsy all Luisa's singing programmes, Stanley made her programme director in Wilbur's place, and Ellen made her her friend. "I thought Marion was the find of my century, and now we've got another just as good," Ellen said, greeting Bootsy with both hands, when I took her out to the Blaire farmhouse.

"I like that," protested Stanley. "I thought I was the find of your century."

Ellen went over and threw her arms around Stanley's neck. "Darling, you are my century, while they just fit into it."

"Hurrah for the twentieth century," said Stanley.

Two weeks later Ellen called Bootsy and me over to her house and told us the news. "Lucille has fallen in love with someone else, and wants Stanley to give her a divorce. After all these years."

"Just for meanness he ought to refuse," I said.

"That's what I told him," nodded Ellen. "But he was so elated, he wired her to get it at once." Ellen

looked up at us and I saw her beautiful eyes were shimmering with tears. "Will you two come to our wedding? We're not getting married for the sake of the Mrs. Grundys of Casper City. We're getting married for the sake of our children."

Chapter Sixteen

FAREWELL TO WHIZ

It was a month after Stanley married Ellen, that I got the telegram from Aunt Edith. "Your mother ill. Think you should come if you can."

Bill Deal and Bootsy urged me to go at once and took over all my radio programmes, while Den and Belinda took over Johnny. The next evening I was in my home town, standing by mother's bed.

Mother was so weak from pneumonia, she could hardly talk, which was exceedingly rare for mother. And Aunt Edith herself had a hollow, hacking, hounding cough that sounded like a t.b. sanatorium. Dust lay thick on the furniture and dirty dishes overflowed the sink on to the kitchen table. And on top of that the plumbing had gone bad, and Joe Erickson, the man the James Plumbing Shop had sent out to dig a ditch in the back yard to find the place where the sewer was stopped up, kept getting drunk and falling into the ditch and had to be pulled out every hour on the hour and sobered up.

Poor mother and auntie, I thought, my heart wrenching. They're old and sick and they need someone to help them.

I stayed a week, nursing mother and auntie, cleaning up the house, and pulling Joe out of the ditch and sobering him up some eighty-six times. Then when the

doctor told me mother was well on the road to recovery, I broke the news that I would have to be getting back to Johnny and my radio job, and I was going to hire a woman.

"What woman?" mother asked. "If you can even find one these days, she's out riveting at three dollars an hour, and she wouldn't be caught dead doing housework."

Mother was right, of course. I got only one response to my frenzied ads in the paper. Poor Mrs. Bloom, who had epileptic fits and whose head shook in permanent nervous negation.

As I looked at Mrs. Bloom's jerking head, I suddenly made up my mind. "Thanks so much for coming, Mrs. Bloom. But I think I'd better give up my job and come home and take care of them myself."

Mother protested, of course. "It was different when I wanted you to come home so we could help you. But now that you've managed so well by yourself and the shoe is on the other foot, I won't have it. Besides, you'll be lost without your radio work."

"I'd be worse lost, knowing my own mother needed me, and I didn't come," I replied.

Up to the Saturday I left for Casper City, mother was still trying to talk me out of it. Even though she had had a bad relapse. "Edith and I are both so much better, we're going to be well in no time. And besides," she added with a flash of her old animation, "you've been so good about pulling Joe out of the ditch and sobering him, the plumbing is practically done."

"Save the upstairs bedroom for me," I rejoined. "I'll be back inside of a month."

Bootsy and Den and Belinda wept when I told them I was leaving and Bill Deal looked like Custer's Last Stand. "Who's going to help Bootsy and me run the station? I was counting on giving you a couple more programs."

"I'm sick about it too, Bill. But when it's your mother, you just can't let her down."

Ellen and Stanley felt bad, too. "Something definitely will be lacking when you're gone."

As soon as Sarah heard the news, she started giving me farewell parties. She had a farewell shower at which all the army wives gave me a suitcase. She had a farewell dinner, to which she invited the whole staff of WHIZ, including the janitor, and at which we had so many toasts and speeches, we all stayed until long after midnight. She had an afternoon tea, to which she invited Den and Belinda and Bootsy and all the rest of the people in the two blocks between her house and mine. She had a farewell cocktail party, to which she invited all the people she and I had interviewed in connection with the Happy Holidays programme. She had a farewell luncheon for all my radio sponsors and their wives and children. And then when Sarah finished that whirl of parties, she started in all over again.

The last week I took a firm stand and turned down the remaining parties Sarah planned to give for me and concentrated on packing my furniture and winding up my work at the radio station.

The morning the van came to take away my furniture and move in Bootsy's, I was sniffling so badly I almost wired mother I was going to stay. How can I leave

Casper City when I love it here so? I wailed to myself. Then I thought of mother and aunt and their pale faces and knew that I wouldn't be happy staying.

That night Johnny and I slept in Den and Belinda's extra bedroom because Bootsy had only one bed. Den had to leave right after dinner because Casper City was having a practise black-out for the first time that night, and Den was the warden for his district. He wore a white helmet that made him look like Teddy Roosevelt hunting lions in Africa. His eyes twinkled as he stuck out his chest. "When the sirens start a-shriekin'," he said, shaking a finger at Belinda and me, "see that you turn off ivry loight and don't so much as stroike a match to smoke a cigarette, or I'll turn ye in."

It was so ghoulish sitting in utter blackness that Bootsy and Belinda and I held each other's hands and told stories of our childhood. And just because I couldn't have a cigarette, I longed for one with a dope-fiend's passion.

At last it was over, and Den came home leading Bill Deal, who looked like something out of a musical comedy in another game hunter's helmet.

For the first time since Emory Wheeler and Wilbur Slemmons had gone off to war and left him behind, Bill was laughing. "At last I've found me a war job on the home front that suits me right down to the ground," he wise-cracked. "I never thought I could go around peeking in other people's windows and have it be legal."

Den winked and put his arm around Bill's shoulder. "It even beats gettin' into people's basements to see what they're hoarding."

The rest of the evening, Bootsy, Belinda, Den, Bill, and I sat and talked. And the next morning at least half the town went down to the station to see Johnny and me off. They brought flowers and more presents, and Bill Deal and Frank Marshall and Jim Greene, the clowns, brought down an old red carpet and a saxophone and a horn and pretended they were a band to see me off.

And the town poet came down to see me off, too. Bob Bovins had three new poems, which he insisted on reading, standing on a kitchen stool.

The first was entitled "Here's to our Marion, our Beacon, our Clarion," and the second was called "Our Taylor is Leaving, and We're All A-Grieving," and the third was simply labelled "Our Flower." But it was so touching I'll have to repeat it for you.

In this sad hour
  We're losing our flower.
Not a rose, not a lilly,
  Nor a daffy-down-dilly.
But a sweet, modest violet
  Is the subject of our triolet.
Oh, she brightened our air waves
  She brightened our lives
Gave us advice on our hair
  Advice on our hives,
Told us what chairs to buy,
  And how to make cakes.
Just to think of losing her
  Gives us the shakes.
So here's to our violet,

Our Beautiful Flower.
Her leaving gives us all
Our most dismal hour.

I kissed and waved and blubbered against the background of Bob's poetry and the off-key music, until Den and Belinda and Bootsy marched me down the red carpet on to the train. I continued to wave and cry until the train pulled out and Casper City was no more.

As I staggered to my seat with Johnny in my arms, I heard a woman behind me say, "Wonder who she is. Some celebrity, of course, or they wouldn't have had a band out for her."

I grinned through my tears. Of course I'm a celebrity, I thought. I've been one of the star broadcasters on WHIZ, 850 on your radio dial. And during my year and a half in Casper City, I've made some of the best friends in the world.