

AUGUST * 1944 - At Tally-Ho

Daddy Wheelchel needed to be at home. He wanted to be with his house-
full of young people:

Dan Jr., resting at home before his last semester at the University of Arkansas;
Elsa, already a Graduate Nurse, excited about her approaching marriage to Chuck Waltz and his visit to the family there with her;
Henrietta, from St. Joseph School of Nursing, home ~~for~~^{for} her second annual vacation;
Loys, also student nurse, on her first vacation;
Pauline anticipating her first permanent wave as a mark of the beginning of her high school days;
Dutch, Uncle Calvin, Mr. Shorty, Mrs. Moore the housekeeper, all were there.

Yes, Daddy's place that mid-August morning was right at home. There was plenty to keep him there in the enjoyment of his family. Why, then, that persistent urge to go to Tally-Ho? It seemed like a nagging idea running through all his work and thoughts: "Go to Tally-Ho! Go to Tally-Ho!" Like the refrain of a familiar song one can't get rid of.

So, on Friday, August 13th, 1944 at breakfast he announced that he had to go to Tally-Ho - for budwood!

At Tally-Ho that day the sun was without mercy - hot and humid. Especially humid in the ground-floor kitchen where Mrs. Ratliff was canning tomatoes; and in the basement where Frances Horton was helping Mary Gibson with the laundry. Mary had replaced her visitor's city clothes with a hot weather costume. For the first time in her life Frances was wearing slacks rolled up above the knees and the blouse tied up under the bosom.

While Mary hung the first basket of clothes on an outdoor clothesline her helper wrung out the second and pranced with it out the back door. She had heard a truck drive into the yard. But that was nothing - at Tally-Ho folks were coming and going at all hours - friends, workers, service people - white and black - it was all the same.

There at the clothesline stood a man talking to Mary. It was too late to turn back unseen. Frances set the basket down and turned to go.

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"Wait a minute, Frances. This is our pecan partner, Dan Wheelchel, you have heard us talk about. Dan, this is Frances Horton, visiting us from Ohio."

Frances smiled in an embarrassed way, conscious of her bare midriff, and walked back to the washing machine. For Mr. Wheelchel, it was not so casual a meeting. At sight of her there flooded through all his being the conviction - definite and clear like an inner voice shouting at him,

"There's your wife!"

Ridiculous. He wasn't looking for a wife. He was in no position to marry. But the inner voice was positive, unmistakable. Bewildered, he turned to Mary,

"Who is that woman? Is she married? How many children does she have?" And Frances finished the rest of the laundry alone for Mr. Wheelchel took Mary to the front gallery where he learned all she knew about this visitor. Mary told him that Mrs. Horton was Bob's distant cousin, a widow, that she had no children, that she was the director of a high school theatre in Ohio, that she was thirty-nine years old.

During dinner across a long cedar table in the brick-floored, cypress-beamed dining room Mr. Wheelchel faced Mrs. Horton as they ate. His mind was in turmoil. But the conviction the voice had given him was unshaken. All afternoon as he walked with Bob Gibson about the orchard above the River answering Bob's questions about the trees, observing their condition, trying to make an estimate of the crop he and the Gibsons could expect, he walked as a man in a daze.

Mrs. Horton was surprised that Mr. Wheelchel was still there at suppertime and evidently intended spending the night at Tallo-Ho. He did not seem like a guest. Bob called him "Paw".

Through the cool of the evening they all sat along the gallery. Presently Mr. Wheelchel asked Mrs. Horton to walk with him down the drive

to the gate. Without much interest she rose and went. They looked at the bright stars shining down between the double row of young pecan trees. August is the month of falling meteors. It was a wonderfully clear night to watch for them.

Making an effort to be pleasant, she showed a little trick of her student days whereby two people can gaze at the stars without craning their necks. Clasp hands at arms length, toes touching, each could lean far back supporting the other and look straight up at the heavens above them. It was fun to do and they identified the constellations they knew. In a few minutes they returned to the gallery. She excused herself saying she was tired and would go out to the room she shared with Jackie Gibson in the Guest House. She slept at once, without another thought of that other guest under the roof at Tally-Ho.

Breakfast came as usual. Mrs. Ratliff rose from the table saying she would do the dishwashing. Mr. Wheelchel asked Mrs. Horton to come with him to cut the budwood he had driven over to get.

As he talked of his work and explained how the scions were cut from this year's growth there was a pride and dignity in his manner that was most impressive. For the first time she really looked at him. He had a good face. A body powerfully built without an ounce of fat, managed with a quickness and grace of a much younger man. He talked little. But when he spoke his resonant quiet voice was supremely masculine and immensely appealing. Such a voice could be cultivated nowhere else than the Deep South. His countenance was open and frank, his expression serene. A good, kindly, intelligent country gentleman he seemed to be.

As he showed her his technique she trimmed the budwood and packed it carefully in the split hickory basket as he directed. He stressed the point that they were dealing with living tissue. Following him to the hydrant she watched as he thoroughly wet the burlap wrappings. His budwood was gathered but he seemed in no hurry to leave. In fact,

he seemed reluctant to go. The two stood in the morning sun beside the rather délapidated pick-up truck. Then, as if he were taking his courage in both hands, he said,

"I'd like to show you my orchard over at Helena. I want to see more of you."

"Oh, Mr. Wheelchel, I'm sorry but I guess there won't be time for that. Sunday Uncle Tom is taking Mary and me to New Orleans. I've never ^{I've longed} been there and ~~had~~ ^{to} love to see that old city. Very soon after we get back I'll have to think about returning to Akron. School begins in another three weeks or so and I've a contract to keep."

"Could'n^e you put off your trip a few days? I have to be with my young folks over the weekend. I could'n^e get back before Monday. If I came back then couldn't you plan to be here?"

"Well, - I guess I could -- "

As he continued to look straight into her eyes, she finished,

"Yes,-- I will, -- I'll be here."

He seemed pleased. But he did not offer to shake hands or say another word. He just got into his truck and drove off, waving out the window as he crossed the cattle-gap and turned into the road.

"Now why did I do that?", she asked herself as she walked slowly into the kitchen where Mrs. Rutliff was ironing.

"That man is interested in you, Frances," she said.

But it seemed quite improbable. Like him, she was not looking for someone to marry.

Following Mr. Wheelchel's visit the days returned almost to normal. There were field peas to be picked, shelled and made ready for the frozen food locker in town; vegetables to be brought from the garden; a big barbeque to be planned with Uncle Tom; the usual lazy visiting; pleasant country housekeeping with Mary and her mother. It seemed a wonderful life to the schoolteacher from Akron. Often the conversation ~~turned~~ turned to the Wheelchels -- the man and his six children, motherless these nine or ten years. Mary and Mrs. Rutliff seemed beat

upon making him the very paragon of a man -- the devoted father, the steady worker overburdened with a housefull of young folks in need of a mother.

Subconsciously, all the denied and suppressed longing for motherhood rose to their talk. But as she listened it seemed to have no personal meaning for her. She thought the two women were being dramatic; looking for something to talk about; but their real regard for him shone through their words. Anyway, family affairs would more likely prevent Mr. Wheelchel's making another trip to Tully-Mo. Why had she given up the long-awaited opportunity of seeing New Orleans? It seemed an unreasonable impulse to have made any such promise.

It was dinnertime before Mr. Wheelchel drove into the yard on Monday. Mrs. Horton had very little feeling of waiting for a date. Bob's orchard partner was returning for another visit with the family as she saw it. She had no notion of what was in his mind concerning her.

But Mr. Wheelchel's actions were purposeful. As they left the table he suggested they drive over to the River Orchard. It was the first drive she had ever had with a friend in a pickup truck. The day was hot, the road dusty. They talked of the country and the crops as they drove to the Post-Office-grocery at Hillhouse to get a Coke. Then across the fields to the dirt road atop the new levee, around to the orchard above the Mississippi River.

Old Man River was on a rampage. Already a long gap showed where the old levee had been. The whole force of the mighty current cut sharply against the orchard's edge. Standing there they watched in awed silence while a fullgrown pecan tree toppled over into the swirling brown flood and disappeared as completely as if it were a tossed stone. Not a green branch nor a soil covered root could be seen. The whole tree was just gone; another scullop of earth crumbled away from the orchard. Never had she seen nature in so violent an act. It was frightening.

There was nothing frightful nor violent in the man's voice or bearing as he took her by the hand and walked under the trees away from the swift horrid river. She was aware of a native shyness in his manner and yet he seemed sure of what he was doing when he placed his huge gentle hands upon her shoulders and said simply,

"I want you to be my wife. I want to marry you."

"Are you trying to tell me you love me?"

Now his timidity before her gave way to gravity and firm conviction.

"Yes, I am telling you just that."

The woman was too amazed and astonished to speak at once. Then,

"Why Mr. Wheelchel, you do not know me; I do not know you. How can you speak of love and marriage?"

He was not discouraged with her answer. Apparently he expected her amaze and disbelief. In his same serene grave way he ~~did~~ suggested,

"Come, let us sit on this tree trunk. I want to explain what I think has happened to us."

There in the warm afternoon they sat upon the fallen pecun tree. He told her how certain he was that it was God's will that ~~they~~ two should find a way to make a home together and finish the task of helping those young people to their maturity. He did not know yet how it could be done. But he believed it was what they were expected to do with the remainder of their lives. And he told her of the stubborn drive to come to Tully-ho when he really had no reason for coming. How at the moment of his arrival there he had seen her walking across the yard and God had certainly spoken to him,

"There's your wife."

There was no mistake about that. It had to be Providential. The whole matter had been wholly spontaneous, taken completely out of his hands. He could not make anything else out of it. All his life he had tried to live as a child of God's and walk in His presence. He could not be wrong about this. Ever since Friday morning he had been able to think

of nothing else. That inner voice had been a genuine Revelation. Now it was up to them to find ^{the} way. He was ready to learn to love her and help her learn to love him. No other basis for marriage was conceivable to either one of them. ~~with the same certainty and conviction.~~

So they talked through the afternoon. Not as two lovers considering marriage in any conventional way. He was an earnest Christian trying to accept so clear a Revelation. In him there was the deep unquestioning faith of a practicing Believer -- not orthodox perhaps, but whole-souled and sure. A deep poetic stream existed in her nature, a ~~strong~~ belief in the historic idea that God does occasionally reach down into the stream of human life to make His purpose known by those of His children who have ears to hear. Here was a man with such ears. She listened as he talked. His quiet and unquestioning confidence bred in her some sort of willingness to hear him out. But she had no sense of participation. She felt as if she were standing apart watching what was happening to her. In silence they drove back to Tally-Ho under the setting sun.

To the end of time that woman will recall with what a bewildering sense of unreality she stood before the basin washing her hands for supper, trying to sort it all out. What was it all about? What was happening to her? What strange compulsion held her captive? Could she accept this man's certainty? Could she follow his leadership in this demanding turning of events in their lives? It was not really doubt of him. Not for a moment had she questioned his integrity. His goodness was beyond doubting. His conviction was as a solid rock. But what had all that to do with her? She had loved in her youth and had faced complete disillusionment. She had known desperate loneliness and walked the Valley of Despond.

As one walking in sleep she announced to Mary and her mother as she took up the evening meal,

"Mr. Weichel has asked me to marry him but I can't make it real."

That evening the family went early to bed leaving the man and woman in the gallery ~~swing~~ talking, talking, talking. Feeling out each other's minds, exploring each other's lives, trying in real earnestness to discover how their ideas of life and their personalities could arrive at common ground of meeting. Seldom have two people come from lives ~~and~~ and training more unrelated. All through the hours of that night until the early dawn they talked - listening by turns to what the other could reveal of himself in the light of the man's conviction.

For both of them life was utterly changed that night. Two lonely and despairing people found new promise, new purpose, new meaning and ~~and~~ above all, new hope for the years ahead. They had thought life had passed them by without genuine personal fulfillment.

And immediately, like an opening flower or a budding tree, life assumed new aspects. There grew within them a sense of the perfect rightness of this whole new way of life - together. The greatest miracle was that through the days that followed, with their final acceptance of this mandate, they began to know they were genuinely and raptuously in love with each other. Mature love, rooted and grounded in Christian character, mutual respect, common purpose, shared endeavor.

Mr. Weichel came back to Tully-Ho for a real lover's meeting the next Saturday. With delicate understanding and genuine friendship the Gibbons with Mrs. Ratliff and Jackie went for the day and evening to visit friends some miles away. The two were left to continue their discovery of each other. He listened with patience and some show of pleasure as she read from her favorite poets. He was deeply moved that she could play the piano, delighted that her taste in music included the old songs he knew. They enjoyed them together at the piano. It was a day of growing companionship, of outrageous unexpected happiness for

the two lovers - now that they knew that was what they were. Standing
hand in hand they could say with Tagore

Bird of the wilderness, my heart,
Has found its sky in your eyes.

During the months that came after, as their wedding plans took
took shape their kinship grew by way of daily exchange of letters.
More glorious and greater significance gathered about the two
songs chosen for their ceremony:

Because God made thee mine, I'll cherish thee
Through light and darkness, through all time to be.
And pray His love will make ~~me~~ love divine,
Because God made thee mine.

and

O Perfect Love, all human love transcending,
Lowly we kneel before Thy throne
That theirs may be the love that knows no ending,
Whom Thou for evermore dost join in one.

Dan + Frances Schelchel
We wrote this together while we
were still in the old house.