Cornucopia

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Abstract

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THERE was nothing left of the early summer moon but a pair of horns on the black of the western horizon when Steve woke me with a nudge in the ribs as he turned the small coupe into Dad's big farm yard. The cool breeze and the quiet of the night hung soothingly over us and dimmed the memory of the long nervous week in the city.

"Lord, what a night!" Steve groaned sleepily as he reached behind the seat for his battered horn case and the jumble of mutes and tin derbys that ear-marked him as a swing musician.

"I thought those fool kids never would let us quit."

"Yeah?" I yawned. "What are you kicking about? You know you'd feel a lot worse if they hadn't kept clapping us back. Anyway, three hours of overtime looks good enough to me." Secretly I was mighty proud of the brother, for he'd had one of those nights when he just couldn't miss and that long half-minute high C had fairly brought down the house. And all he had said about it was the sardonic, "I'll be picking lip out of my teeth for a week."

Together we walked into the kitchen and then the dining room before switching on the light.

The big Seth Thomas clock on the china closet ticked asthmatically and glared accusingly at us through hands that pointed to 4:30.

Steve strode over to the clock, and reaching behind it, pulled out the week's accumulation of mail that the folks had laid aside for us.

"Well, Champ, do I have any, or are you reading mine too?" I asked impatiently after a few minutes. But Steve made no move of comprehension. He was reading rapidly through a heavy white letter bearing the return address of my Uncle Ben's bank in South Dakota. I had an uneasy feeling that a crisis was coming up—and one look at Steve convinced me.

"Listen to this, Tim." His eyes were fixed on the bottom of the last page and his voice shook a little as he read rapidly: "So Steve, if you'll give up that damn foolishness of being a musician and
come out here to Dakota, I'll put you in the bank and make a business man out of you—not a play-boy!"

"Well," I said, "he certainly puts it bluntly enough, but man alive, that's quite a break. When you going?"

"Going? I'm not going anywhere, I'm a musician—not a banker."

"You're crazy!" I snapped. "You've been a musician since you were ten and you haven't got a cent to your name." I knew that talking to Steve like that was about as safe as giving a hot-foot in a powder magazine, but exasperation drove me on. "Sure you've made lots of money, but you can't—or won't—save it. That's what worries Dad so. Aw, come on, Steve," I was almost pleading now, "be reasonable." But Steve Powers was like all his stubborn ancestors and when I saw his lower lip protruding sullenly I knew that I was butting against a stone wall. He stood there silently, refusing to speak. Slowly his cold blue eyes swung to me. My valor gradually gave way to discretion as I turned to walk slowly up the stairs with Steve following at my heels.

A rooster crowed drowsily from the chicken yard and the wind whispered with many gentle voices in the pines, but it was long before either Steve or I dropped off to sleep.

When I at last awoke the Sunday morning sun was high and hot over the garden. Looking out the window, I could see Dad and Steve leaning against the fence and staring off into the woods. The murmur of their quiet talk gave me no hint of their conversation. I was about to go down to join them when I caught a glimpse of the letter drooping from Steve's fingers. This was a man-to-man affair that I wasn't going to sit in on.

Their voices had been pitched too low for me to hear, but suddenly Steve whirled from the fence and faced his father. I could hear the rising tension in his voice as he fought for self-control. "But I tell you, Dad, I'd rather do anything else in the world than hang up my horn. Even if I'm never anything but a two-bit scratch man playing for cakes, I'd rather do that than give up my music. Me—a banker!"

Dad's face was sad and worried, but his voice was still calm as he tamped more tobacco into his pipe. "How good a musician are you, Son?"

For a moment Steve was taken back in surprise, but he recovered enough to say slowly, in a voice that I could scarcely hear, "Well, I'm probably the best cornet man in this end of Illinois."
As Dad looked up sharply he went on, "Oh, sure, I suppose that sounds conceited as hell, but I guess I was just born with a little talent. Lord knows, I've had little enough training," he added bitterly.

Again Dad spoke quietly. "Are you going to get any better?"

Steve's face fell as he answered, "I don't know. It's hard to tell. You know how my mouth is." Dad nodded slowly, for we had discovered long ago that the high narrow roof of his mouth would never allow him to do that one basic bit of technique that any trumpeter should have—Steve Powers, the sweetest horn in the mid-west, had never been able to triple-tongue. Steve began again. "I'll probably never be big time." Then he added wryly—"Some of the boys say that I don't get drunk enough to be a genius."

Dad was briskly knocking the ashes from his pipe as if to say the conversation was about over. "Well, if you're never going to be a complete success, I can't see any good reason for you rotting away blowing your brains out on a bunch of plumbing. I say, take up Ben's offer and be damn glad to get it."

Steve jerked upright and color flooded his face. Some of the fire of it must have gotten into his brain. "Don't you understand? Can't you see what this . . ." he groped for words, "this 'blowing my brains out on a bunch of plumbing' means to me?" His voice choked off and he fell silent but one look at the stiff agony of his face told me that deep inside his hurt and resentment slashed mutely on.

"No, of course you can't," I could feel him protesting. "You're nothing but a dirt farmer with no future or past but dirt and heat, sweat. You never knew what it was to take a pile of cold, dead brass and make it come alive with better music than anyone else has ever made before. You can't feel the glory and the out-of-this-worldness that music can bring. You don't have any emotions that come surging up inside and tear at your heart until you have to pick up a horn and blow them at the night. This being a musician isn't like being a farmer or a doctor, it's deeper and you can't shake it. It hangs on forever like a fever that burns and kills and you can't get away."

After a long silence Steve turned and walked slowly from the garden. Dad could only stare after him with thoughtful, puzzled eyes.

A moment later Steve was racing up the stairs with the long,
March, 1943

A gleaming trumpet in his hands. In another second a thin crescendo of sound slivered the morning air and broke like a great rocket into fragments of pure music that floated and soared in the shadows of the room. Steve Powers was sobbing to himself, and cursing his fate, and praying to a distant god—but only I, and perhaps a disinterested angel, knew. There was a lump in my throat as I crept silently down stairs to say, “Morning, Mom. Nice day, isn’t it?”

* * *

It was five days after we had returned to the city and the smell and noise of too many people were already getting on my nerves. Trying to kill a little time during the noon hour, I walked into the dingy little music shop of Joe Hines to get a new skin for one of my drums.

Joe met me in the doorway and in his gentle old voice, that was still rich with its Bohemian heritage, said, “What can I do for you, Timmy?”

“If you can find one in this bull-in-a-china-shop emporium of yours,” I said, “I could mighty well use a new head for that medium tom-tom of mine. And, oh yeah, get me a handful of sticks.”

“Are you boys getting that hot lately, or are you letting them shoot dice on the drum again?”

“Well, it’s not dice, but it might just as well be the way I’m putting money into new sticks and heads. My crazy brother ran hog-wild with that horn of his all last night. It was all I could do to keep up with him when he started to unwind, and the rest of the brass got so they’d just give up and go out for a smoke when he felt a chorus coming up.”

“Tell me, Timmy,” Joe interrupted my harangue, “what is Steve going to do about this job his uncle offered him?”

“Great Guns, do you know about that, too?”

“Sure, kid. Every musician in town has heard about it. He was in here yesterday asking my advice.”

“I’ll bet you told him to stick with his music, huh?”

It was a moment before the old man answered. “No, Tim. I’ll tell you just what I told him. ‘Steve,’ I said, ‘if you can get out of this racket while you’re still young, do it! You’ll think it’s going to break your heart to give up music—and maybe it will but it’s not as bad as the hurt you’ll get if you stay with it. Look at me. When I was young like you I had the world by the tail. In the Old
Country I was just starting on my first concert tour. My cello and I were a great success.” The old man’s eyes were far-off and bright with his long-ago memories. “I had money and fame and a girl I loved. For ten years I was the toast of three continents. But look at me now. A little guy with a crippled arm. No one recognizes me as Josef Freugman. They wouldn’t care if they did. What is there left? I still have the girl I loved. But you know how she is—barely half alive with paralysis and there’s not a thing I can do. I tell you Steve, this business is no good. Get away while you can.’ That’s what I told him, Timmy, and now I wonder what he’ll do.”

“I don’t know, Joe. I just don’t know.” I picked up my package and walked out into the crowded street that teemed with people like those who had once beaten a path to the door of Josef Freugman. They had beaten a path and had paused for a little time in ovation. But they had grown restless and had walked on with never a backward glance.

When I got back to the shabby room that Steve and I shared while in the city I found Steve leaning back in his chair with his feet up on the table. His eyes were closed and I would have thought him asleep except for the cigarette that alternately glowed and grayed as it hung from his lips.

“Hello, Steve,” I said soberly, for my talk with Joe had made me more worried than ever. “What are you doing home at this time of day?”

“Timothy, my lad, it’s like this. I’ve written a letter to the great man with the bank—his nibs, our Uncle Ben.”

“And what did you say?” I asked suspiciously.

“Don’t rush me, bub, or I won’t tell you.” He paused and my hands were clammy as I waited for the rest—I didn’t understand this sudden good humor after a whole week of silent, almost sullen, withdrawal.

“I’ve told Uncle Benny to kill the fatted calf and get out the gold leaf to make me a junior partner because I’m going to be a banker.”

“That’s great, Steve!” I cried, “It’s the best thing in the world. Congratulations!” I rushed toward him to shake his hand but abruptly he dropped his feet to the floor and turned away from me to stare out into the street. I had the peculiar feeling that the Iron Man was quietly crying to himself. I could only stand there dumb—wishing I knew what to say.
An hour later, just as I was struggling into the last loop of my black tie, there was a sharp, excited knocking on the door. Without waiting for a reply our sleek, good-looking front man, Jerry Reece, burst into the room. That constant ability of Jerry's to keep bursting into things made him one of the best leaders in the business, although he knew less about music than any of us—with the possible exception of me.

“What d'you say, boys?” he shouted with more vivacity than I could muster to answer him. “Wait till you hear the news. We're on king's row now, and we're gonna be king size to boot.”

“All right, Sunshine. Spill it,” Steve said with no apparent enthusiasm.

“OK, Dead Pan. But this'll snap you out of that funeral mood you're in. Micky just phoned and said that St. Pierre heard us last night and is booking us for a public audition at the Ruby Room next Wednesday night. We're on Easy Street, I tell you!”

He stopped suddenly and looked at us curiously—a streak of worry flickered on his eye-brows. “You didn't hock your horn again, did you, Steve? Oh well, we can get it out easy enough.”

He was all smiles again.

Steve spoke slowly, “That's great for you and the boys, Jerry, but I'm quitting the band business.”

“The hell! I thought they were just kidding about that offer of yours.” But then his rosy face was abruptly pale. “You can't do that, Steve,” he almost screamed. “Micky said it was that horn of yours that brought St. Pierre around. We don't have a prayer if you leave us.”

“I'm sorry, Jerry. I don't want to miss the Ruby Room booking any more than you do. But . . .”

“Well, then, why miss it? Come along and we'll boot this band clear across the country. You know we're good.”

“I've got to make the break sometime, Jerry. This is it.”

“But think of the boys. They've been playing their hearts out for peanuts long enough. They deserve the break. You're not gonna be heel enough to keep them from having this one chance at the spotlight, are you?” His voice was hard and accusing.

“Forget it, Jerry,” I interrupted from the door of the bedroom. “He's made up his mind and it's about time, too.”

“Keep out of this, Kid.” Steve snapped. For a long time he stood facing the street, his head bowed in thought. Abruptly he straightened and walked stiffly across the room to the desk where
the newly written letter lay. He picked it up gently and for a moment held it lightly in both hands. With a sudden twitch of his fingers he tore it once through the middle and let the pieces flutter to the floor. Jerry Reece slapped him on the shoulder and laughed like a boy who had just escaped a spanking. Carefully I slid into my coat, trying hard not to think.

The next four days were packed with rehearsals and arrangements and fittings. By Wednesday night we had reached a fine edge and had come to the place where we felt that the unaccustomed glory and crowds of the Ruby Room could scarcely faze us. But when I took my four light rim shots on the snare, to start the band on our first number, I knew that something wasn't quite right.

Maybe we were scared, maybe we were stale, or maybe we just weren't as good as we had thought, but by eleven o'clock our confidence had ebbed to a new low as we watched the increasing boredom of the crowd.

Jerry looked as if his smile had been painted on with shellac that was slowly drying and painfully pulling his face out of shape. I didn't much care what happened to the band, but it made me sick and a little sore to see such potentially fine music going sour. There was nothing for me to do but beat out what rhythm there was and hope for a miracle.

But quite suddenly it changed—I could feel the band beginning to click, and I knew why. Steve had stood up and carefully worked his way to the front of the stand; for a moment he stood there fondling the slender horn. He spoke in a low voice that we couldn't hear but his lips were framing words that we knew well enough: "Let's feed it to 'em, men. Follow me and we'll ride 'em right out of this world." He winked slowly at me and lifting the golden trumpet to his lips, began to breathe out the lovely, bouncy old Honeysuckle Rose. Suddenly, the notes were beads on a necklace that brought sheer magic to the crowded ball room. The men were pulling together as only good—really good—musicians can. The lilting melody sparkled with a quicksilver loveliness. There was no tenseness, no worry, only a solid, impregnable girdle of perfection that bound us and whirled us straight into the hearts and brains of the now motionless dancers. But high above all else the lancing, driving horn cast its gleam as one brilliant passage after another was flung into the air to be followed
and surpassed by others even better. The Angel Gabriel himself must have stooped to listen.

At last it was over and St. Pierre was rushing toward us with the coveted contract in his hands. We were in—but good!

During the excitement no one had noticed Steve silently pack his horn and slip out the side exit. We were well into the next number before I discovered that his chair was empty. I'd scarcely had time to worry about it when one of the bus boys slipped in and handed me a hurriedly scrawled note. I read it hastily, taking the beat with the foot treadle on the bass. The note said merely this:

Dear Tim,

Tell Jerry I've given him his band—now I'm going to do something for myself. Tonight I proved to myself that I could be a success; that's nice to know. Now I'm after something else. I'm going to be the best damn banker you ever saw. I'll see you at the farm in the morning before I leave.

So long,
Steve

Quite irrationally and with no regard for the rhythm, I came down hard on all three cymbals. Jerry Reece frowned disapprovingly, but I didn't care. I just smiled blandly and turned out a pair of the neatest paradiddles of my career.

* * *

Steve Powers went through a year of hell in his slow metamorphosis. His letters were noncommittal enough, but reading between the lines was like looking through the bars into a pit. But one day the winds changed. A phrase from a letter says it all, "Today I met the best looking girl in town. I'm invited to her house for dinner Sunday." After that there was a change in the arid, sterile climate of South Dakota. I don't know if anyone else noticed it.

The other day I was usher at Steve's wedding. After it was over I kissed the bride and then turned to Steve and said, "Sorry you came, Champ?"

He punched me lightly in the ribs and answered, "What do you think, bub?"

We shook hands quietly. Pride was in our eyes.